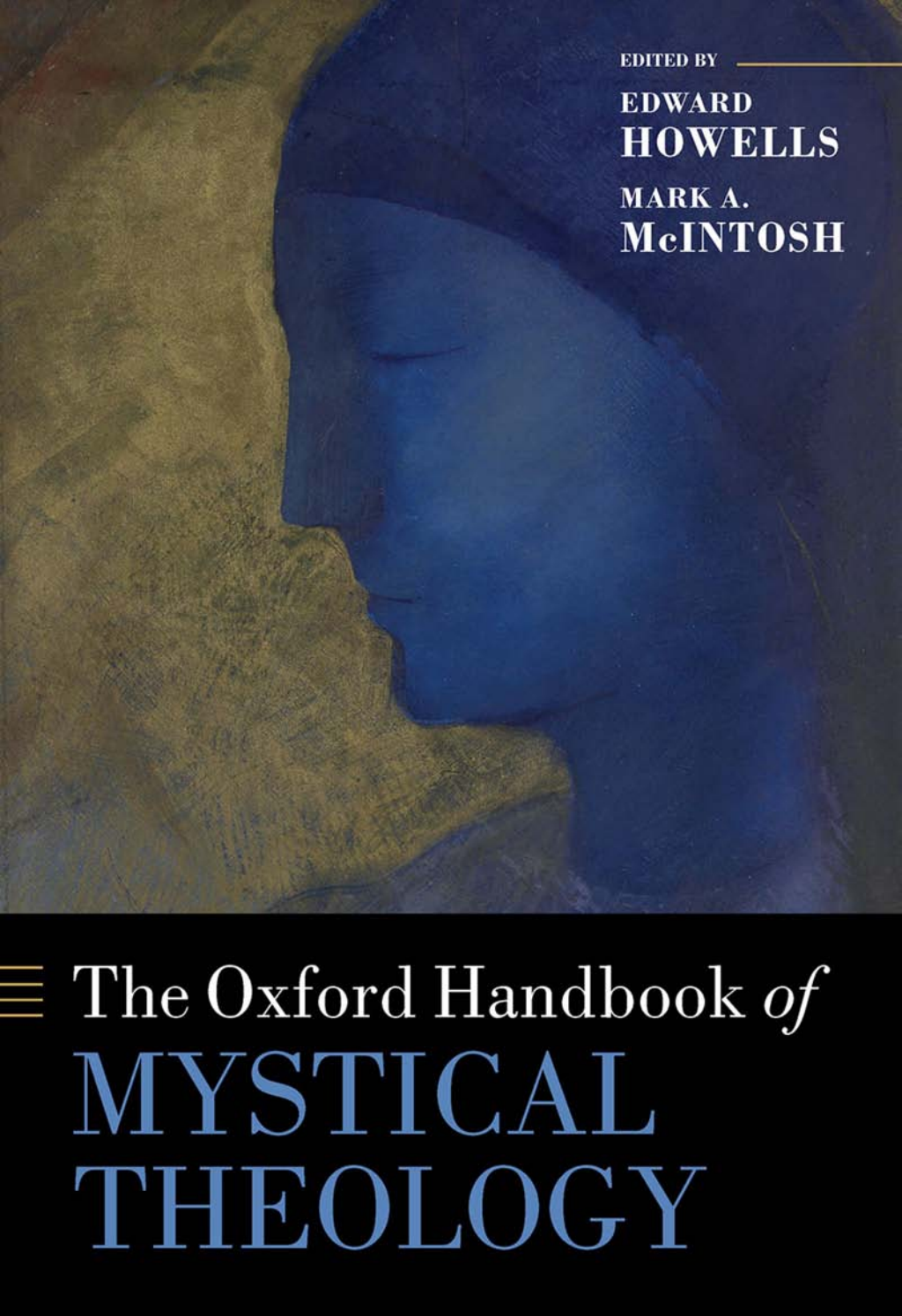




EDITED BY

EDWARD
HOWELLS

MARK A.
McINTOSH

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
MYSTICAL
THEOLOGY

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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and

MARK A. McINTOSH

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INTRODUCTION

MARK A. McINTOSH AND EDWARD HOWELLS

MYSTICAL theology is central to Christianity. It has been present from the earliest times as a way of participating in and reflecting upon God's hidden presence—as Christians have come to understand that in the light of their beliefs about the inclusion of creation in Christ's intimacy with the Father through the power of the Spirit. Over time, the practices, texts, and teachings that seem to foster inclusion in this intimacy have all become the material of mystical theology. While pointing to the mending and perfecting of creation that God seeks, mystical theology also considers the further Christian belief in the fountal breakthrough of the divine source into human experience, and the new possibilities of meaning and action that arise in the subject and the community as a result.

Yet potential readers of this volume may be curious about the significance of its title: why 'mystical theology' and not 'mysticism'? Some readers could be concerned that this volume might impose theological dogma upon what they may see as a more universal religious experience, or, conversely, that it might substitute abstract theoretical interpretation for a lived reality whose meaning is unique to each individual. We do understand these concerns. We may not agree with their premises, but we believe there are good reasons why they may be allayed—and why a historically informed and critically generous understanding of mystical theology may be helpfully advanced.

First of all, we note that 'mysticism' is itself a modern term and one that few of the figures discussed in this volume would have recognized. It was coined in an era whose theory of the relationship between experience and interpretation has been interestingly problematized; so it sometimes carries presuppositions that can work against a thoughtful development of the hermeneutics of mystical texts (by tending to privilege an attempted reconstruction of putative mystical experiences 'behind' the text). As Bernard McGinn notes in the general introduction to his authoritative history of Western Christian mysticism:

Mystical theology has often been understood in terms of misleading models of a simple distinction between experience and understanding that do justice neither to the texts of the mystics nor to the complexities of the relations between experience

and understanding that modern epistemological and cognitional theories have presented to us. Mystical theology is not some form of epiphenomenon, a shell or covering that can be peeled off to reveal the 'real' thing. The interactions between conscious acts and their symbolic and theoretical thematizations are much more complex than that... Rather than being something added on to mystical experience, mystical theory in most cases precedes and guides the mystic's whole way of life.

(McGinn 1991: p. xiv)

Mystical theology, as McGinn suggests, works attentively and intentionally at this always unfolding interplay between mystical insight and theory on the one hand and the embodied realities of mystical life on the other. So in calling this a handbook of mystical theology, the editors by no means intend to devalue religious experience (see Howells, Chapter 3, for a full consideration of this important topic). Rather we seek to engage with a very long-standing discipline, one that has not only played a crucial role in the theological life of the Christian community but which is also an increasingly significant topic in the academic study of theology and religion.

Like many forms of contextual and emancipatory theology, mystical theology is critically aware that there are no 'views from nowhere', and that all our experience is mediated and profoundly structured by the language and culture and community we share. Indeed mystical theology, also much like liberation theology, directly lives from and reflects upon the reciprocal relationship between Christianity's texts, practices, and beliefs, and on the other side, the community's sense of its ongoing encounter with God (see Williams, Chapter 1, for an account of this unfolding reciprocal relationship). In the 1960s the mystical theologian Thomas Merton offered a series of talks for the novices of his monastery; he explained his goal by highlighting exactly this reciprocal relationship between mystical consciousness and the church's beliefs and teachings:

Without mysticism there is no real theology, and without theology there is no real mysticism. Hence the emphasis will be on mysticism as theology, to bring out clearly the mystical dimensions of our theology, hence to help us to do what we must really do: live our theology. Some think it is sufficient to come to the monastery to live the rule. More is required—we must live our theology, fully, deeply, in its totality. Without this, there is no sanctity. The separation of theology from 'spirituality' is a disaster. (Merton 2017: 1)

While the editors of this volume would not of course wish to rule out the possibility that some readers might be helped to live their theology and be graced with sanctity, our explicit aims are mostly more pedestrianly academic than spiritually audacious: to help readers see, as Merton puts it, 'the mystical dimensions of our theology', and the profound contribution of mystical teachers to Christian theology.

Nonetheless, Merton's perspective is deeply informative, for it underscores two essential features of mystical theology across the rich variety of its expressions. First, mystical theology, far from being narrowly concerned with specialized spiritual experiences, engages with the whole range of Christian beliefs and teachings, theology 'in its totality'

as Merton says; and second, mystical theology explores and interprets every doctrine to help believers find there a doorway into a living, transformative encounter with the divine reality to which, Christians believe, their theological language is meant to point—allowing Christians, as Merton puts it, to live into their theology. As Aquinas observes (*Summa Theologiae* II-2.1.2), the faith of a believer by no means reaches its goal in the propositions of the church's teaching, but rather in the superabundant divine truth itself—which theology can only approach through the vitally necessary but always insufficient medium of human speech. It should not be surprising, then, that there is an expression of Christian theology, mystical theology, particularly focused on, so to speak, turning the creed into prayer, guiding believers into the 'more' of divine meaning beyond words—and this transforming contemplative consciousness then, reciprocally, permits the Christian community to understand more deeply what it believes and to clarify and critique the manner in which it expresses and lives its beliefs (see McIntosh, Chapter 2, for a theological rationale for mystical theology).

Mystical theology is *mystical* per se not because it deals with the experiential (though it sometimes does) but because it deals with what is 'hidden', beyond what mortal eyes can see and tongues can speak: the infinite superabundance of divine self-communication availing itself of creaturely modes of expression, and present there as a hidden, or mystical, reality and depth of meaning. For Christians, of course, the most radically self-communicating advent of this divine speech in creation is Christ: the infinite divine meaning expressed through frail yet vindicated human flesh. The hypostatic union in Christ of true humanity and true divinity becomes the ground for mystical theology's attention to all the other forms of divine presence: in scripture, liturgy, the creation, historical struggles for justice, and in the lives of the marginalized. It is precisely because the mystical presence of God is an *infinite* reality that mystical theology draws the believing community into an encounter that must afford not only discursive knowledge, but transformative understanding and embodied wisdom.

So this volume provides a guide to the mystical element of Christianity as a theological phenomenon. In this respect it differs not only from psychological and anthropological studies of mysticism, but from other theological studies, such as more practical or pastorally oriented works that examine the patterns of spiritual progress and offer counsel for deeper understanding and spiritual development. It also differs from more explicitly historical studies tracing the theological and philosophical contexts and ideas of various key figures and schools, as well as from literary studies of the linguistic tropes and expressive forms in mystical texts. None of these perspectives is absent, but the method here is more deliberately theological, working from within the fundamental interests of Christian mystical writers to the articulation of those interests in distinctively theological forms, in order, finally, to permit a critical theological engagement with them for today.

This rationale is reflected in the structure of chapters. Part I introduces the approach to mystical theology (Chapters 1–3) and offers a historical overview (Chapters 4–5). Part II attends to the concrete context of sources and practices of mystical theology (Chapters 6–13). Part III then moves to the fundamental conceptualities of mystical

thought (Chapters 14–21). And Part IV ends with the central contributions of mystical teaching to theology and metaphysics (Chapters 22–33).

Readers with a variety of interests will find different pathways through the book. The structure permits those with historical interests, for instance, to focus on the historical-intellectual emphasis of the chapters of Parts I and II. Spiritual practices are treated especially in Part II. Literary interests are served especially in Chapters 12 and 13. Those with theological interests may be attracted to the interplay between the mystical conceptualities explored in Part III and mystical contributions to theology and philosophy considered Part IV. Extensive exposition of individual mystical teachers is present throughout the book, and can be traced with the help of the index.

We are grateful to the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago whose generous assistance allowed many of the authors of the volume to meet at Loyola to work collaboratively on the shape and focus of the volume as well as to discuss preliminary sketches of many chapters. We were deeply honoured to have as our interlocutor at this gathering Adriaan Peperzak, Professor of Philosophy at Loyola. From the earliest stages of the volume through to its publication we are immensely grateful and indebted to Jacob Torbeck, Ph.D. candidate in theology at Loyola, for his adroit and insightful assistance with all matters editorial and beyond.

We are profoundly grateful to all of the contributors to this volume, not only for their thoughtfulness and erudition, but especially for their collegial spirit and costly willingness to work together in creating a volume that would not simply be a collection of papers but strive for genuine coherence. In writing the specific chapters we together discerned as necessary for a comprehensive volume, the authors have made it possible for us all to offer you, the readers, our collective wisdom about the shape of this field.

The editors would like to express our deep gratitude, and to honour the memory of those who were participants from the very early stages of this project but whose names do not appear because of their untimely deaths: William Harmless SJ, Professor of Historical Theology at Creighton University, John Hughes, Dean of Chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge, and Dennis Martin, Professor of Theology at Loyola University Chicago. We regret the absence of their contributions and remember them with affection.

Finally, it is to Bernard McGinn that the editors would like to offer particular gratitude, not just for his two chapters in this volume, but for his towering contribution to the field, in his multi-volume history of mysticism and numerous monographs and articles. His work has shaped the field. As a professor at the University of Chicago, he launched perhaps not a thousand scholars of mystical theology, but many dozens, a good few of them authors here. Just some of the fruits of his work are on display to a degree, we hope, in the present endeavour.

It seems fitting to conclude this preface by giving the last word to a mystical theologian herself, indeed one of the greatest of the Middle Ages: Catherine of Siena. Even in this very brief excerpt from one of her letters, readers will find notable features that could prompt multiple lines of inquiry: for example, the nature of the epistolary form as a genre of mystical writing, the role of the mystical teacher as social agent, the important resonances with analogous teachings in the tradition (see e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine*

Names 4.13; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.37.2 *ad* 3), and the creative and sophisticated rhetorical interweaving of multiple Christian doctrines with unabashedly erotic and anthropomorphic imagery.

As you read Catherine's powerful and affirming words to her correspondent, written during a time of harrowing plague, when human life must have seemed not only terribly vulnerable but perhaps also of little use and without point, we hope you will feel encouraged to venture deep into the pages of this book, where you will find many colleagues ready and willing to join you in the search for deeper meaning and understanding.

Love, then, love! Ponder the fact that you were loved before you ever loved. For God looked within himself and fell in love with the beauty of his creature and so created us. He was moved by the fire of his ineffable charity to one purpose only: that we should have eternal life and enjoy the infinite good God was enjoying in himself.

(Catherine of Siena, Letter 28; Noffke, 2001: i. 132)

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PART I

UNDERSTANDING
MYSTICAL
THEOLOGY

CHAPTER 1

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN SELF-UNDERSTANDING

ROWAN WILLIAMS

CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS

IF it is right to say that Christianity is a new consciousness before it is a new theology, we shall need to think through what is involved in that new consciousness—not in an attempt at some impossible task of reconstructing the psychology of individual first-century believers, but in the same way that we examine the ‘consciousness’ of any historical era: through the shifts in language and imagery that are going on, the new practices that emerge, the new ways in which sense is being collectively made. And to get some grip on this requires us in turn to clarify what problems are being dealt with in these new modes of speaking and acting. Christian scripture and the literature of the earliest Christian decades show us a picture of very diverse communities gradually consolidating a language in common that was not that of either the Jewish world or the Greek-speaking intellectual and religious environment of the Eastern Mediterranean of the day, but a set of fresh ways of picturing the human narrative and the human situation in the light of certain events. The books of the New Testament suggest a strong convergence around some recurring themes: the believer is simultaneously ‘immersed’ in the life of Jesus of Nazareth—now raised from death, prayerfully active in heaven, and designated to return and judge the world—and, in virtue of this, equipped to address God in the words of Jesus, as ‘Father’; the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection are analogous to the foundational events of Israel’s identity, to the covenant with Abraham and the exodus from Egypt as commemorated in the Passover; the active presence of God is described as ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’, released in its fullness as a result of Jesus’s dying and rising; the community of belief is summoned to a pattern of radical mutual service and self-forgetfulness. Different authors stress different elements of this, and each adds

specific refinements or elaborations, but this seems to mark out the general territory of self-definition (for various accounts of this diversity, see e.g. Rowland 2002; Dunn and Mackey 1987; Wright 1992; Bockmuehl 2006; Moxnes 2014).

The implications of all this include the claim that the Christian community is—at least—an analogue of Israel as the historic people of God, called and chosen, constituted as a community by a divine act. And, although this is not always clear to the modern reader of Christian scripture, this means that Israel's identity as a people called to *worship* in a way appropriate to human destiny and capacity as such is now appropriated by the new community. Israel's worship in the Temple embodied a number of crucial theological convictions—that the Temple ritual (and indeed the Temple as an architectural space) represented creation in its fullness, creation in harmony with its creator, that it daily re-enacted and renewed the divine promise of alliance with the chosen people, and that what was done in the Temple mirrored or shared in or both the eternal worship of heaven (Barker 2003, 2004, 2011). And this is where the strains and controversies of the Jewish world in the Second Temple period illuminate what is going on. The restored Herodian Temple was an overwhelming and magnificent structure, but its administration was in the hands of what many considered a compromised or corrupt elite. Reactions to this included the lay pietist movement usually called 'Pharisees' for whom the fulfilment of the Torah's prescriptions in every detail constituted a sort of re-embodiment of what the Temple ritual symbolized—the regular offering of a sacrificial gift and *self-gift* to establish peace between heaven and earth and to reaffirm the covenant between God and God's people. Others, like those who composed the texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls, reconstructed a ritual pattern independent of the Jerusalem Temple in an intense corporate life whose observances were thought of as making the community itself a kind of temple, a place where heaven and earth were made one. Scattered throughout the books of the New Testament are passages that in fact point us to the central conviction that what has been done in the life and death and rising of Jesus is precisely that restoration of both covenant and created order that the Temple ritual enacted, so that the effect for those who committed themselves to the community was to enable them to offer worship with the angels, standing in the place defined by Jesus, speaking his words and so growing into a humanity restored to its proper place in creation. Hence the language about 'new creation' and Christ as another 'Adam' in St Paul; the complex meditation on eternal priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews; and the emphasis in St John on sharing the life of Jesus and being where he is (Attridge 2010 for excellent studies on some of these texts; see also Lee 2002; Burrridge 2007). The Christian is the person who is released and enabled to look God in the face and address God with *parrhesia*, 'boldness', in virtue of sharing that divine 'breath' which belongs to Jesus (Witherington 2004: 207–11, 216–19; Wright 2013: 709–28, 1074–6). And in the last book of Christian scripture, the apocalyptic vision of John, we read (Rev. 7: 15) that the martyrs of the new community serve God day and night in the heavenly Temple and, even more significantly, that the blessed at the end of time will see God face to face 'and his name will be on their foreheads' (22: 4): that is, they are like the High Priest of the earthly temple vested for the ceremonies of Israel's liturgy, wearing on his forehead the mark of dedication to God

(Exod. 28: 36). What the work and suffering of Jesus make possible is that believers stand where he stands, in the position of the High Priest of the first covenant, at the heart of a liturgically structured universe.

INHABITING MYSTERY

Thus, the earliest Christianity involved a refocusing around the person of Jesus of assorted Jewish images and formulae, in the light of the belief that an unprecedented directness of relation with the creator of all was made available through him. Because of Jesus believers stood in the heavenly sanctuary, not only in an earthly one, as a community of 'priests'; they were confronted by, and invited into, an open heaven. We cannot be sure how far back the traditions go of Jewish visionary and ecstatic journeys to the heavenly court or sanctuary (the classic exposition remains Rowland 1982), but it is likely that this developing genre of religious writing was familiar to many early Christian believers. Ecstatic experience of one sort or another is mentioned in Paul's writings, in terms both of his own visionary ascent to heaven and of the regular prophetic manifestations and speaking in tongues at the prayer meetings of at least some of the churches he established. It undoubtedly reinforced the conviction of encountering the divine with various boundaries removed. And what is important for our purposes is that this early Christian self-understanding and self-definition would have been unthinkable without the continuing reality of a sense of active, perceptible encounter with the divine. To be a Christian at this stage was not primarily to possess a certain set of beliefs about a distant God or even a recently active saviour-figure; it was to see and imagine oneself afresh in relation to the stories of the saviour, and to be involved in a rapid but far-reaching reconsideration of what could truthfully be said about both God and humanity in this light. The believer is someone who is inhabited, more deeply and comprehensively than others, by the holy presence out of which all things come, and is at the same time an inhabitant of a world that is larger than that immediately visible or tangible. Thus, the believer is simultaneously a 'sanctuary', a holy location, in himself or herself *and* someone admitted to the ultimate sanctuary that is God's presence. The right to be directly in God's presence ('in the Father's bosom', to use the resonant phrase of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:18)) that belongs to Jesus is bestowed on the believer.

But this is where another round of complex reflection begins. Christians in the early centuries work insistently and imaginatively at clarifying what all this language means in constructing a coherent picture of how God is and acts. And as this clarification goes forward, one of the things that comes most clearly into focus is that Jesus of Nazareth must be described as embodying and communicating divine life in a completely radical and unconstrained way: he is the human form of the eternal Word of God, the Word present to and with God from before the world's foundation. As the doctrinal definitions of the fourth century finally establish, this Word which is the foundation of the coherence of all finite things cannot as such be an item in any list of separate and limited beings

(O'Collins 1995: 224–9; Farrer and MacSwain 2013: 34–6). The Word is by nature or essence divine in the same sense that the God Jesus prays to is divine. And this means in turn that *if* we are to make sense of these claims that are being made about Jesus and the divine Word, and *if* at the same time we are not to deny or reduce the full actuality of his historical humanity, we cannot be satisfied with a model that sets divine life and human life alongside each other as parallel realities that may be in some sort of competition. The divine and the human do not have to negotiate *Lebensraum* in the person of Jesus. To say, with the doctrinal formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries, that in the life of Jesus both humanity and divinity are present in full, unqualified active force means that the presence of divinity does not function in the same way as another finite agency. The development of Christology (and the Trinitarian scheme of understanding that goes with it) advances hand in hand with the more explicit recognition in Christian writing about the spiritual life that our encounter with God, our inhabiting and being inhabited by divine agency, our recreation as a place in which God dwells, is radically different from encounter with any created agency. It involves a profound displacement of easy and manageable ideas about God. What we believe about Christ and about the Trinity inexorably leads us to recognize the way in which our attempts to speak of the divine will fail to capture an 'essence', an account of what it is like to be God. Hence the emphasis in theologians of the fourth century like the Cappadocian Fathers on the Christian life as a life of constant progress into a kind of darkness, and the further development of this insight in the centuries following, especially in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus (Turner 1995: 11–49).

The cluster of insights which initially illuminate Christian identity, insights about what Jesus bestows by his living, dying, and rising and about how he makes possible our admission to the presence of God as Father, are foundational for the development of apophatic theology, the theology that warns against unexamined affirmations about what God is like. Such a 'theology of negation', which denies the possibility of defining what it is to be God, is not simply a borrowing of Middle Platonic rhetoric about the indescribability of the divine essence, though this non-Christian tradition of course plays a crucial role in shaping the way the challenge is articulated. It is also and importantly bound in with the long process of working out what it means to say that the eternal Word is embodied in Jesus and creates in us by the Spirit a profound intimacy with the God addressed by Jesus, the God in whose 'bosom' Jesus resides. In briefer terms, the theology of darkness and negation—which is also the theology of 'ekstasis' and transfiguration, because it questions the conventional boundaries of human capacity—cannot be separated from Christology. The divine life that is acknowledged in Christ and understood as the source and motive energy of our transformation into new life in relation with God is acknowledged at the same time as radically out of our grasp, in language or sensation. But—and here is a further development of how Christian self-understanding is shaped by the 'mystical'—this means that our journey into the apprehension and enjoyment of God is not something that comes to an end with a static set of experiences or formulae; it continues to expand into the endless space of God's presence. As Gregory of Nyssa famously says in the fourth century, its 'limit' or definition

(*horos*) is to have no limit (Gregory of Nyssa 1863a: 300D; cf. McIntosh 1998: 200–3); and he notes elsewhere that recognizing the infinite mysteriousness of God is bound up with recognizing the mysteriousness of human nature itself (Gregory of Nyssa 1863b: 155). The nature of the God we are engaged with tells us something about our own nature and potential; setting God free from our conceptual ambitions is connected with how we set free our perception of other human beings from similar ambitions to contain or control, to understand definitively (Louth 1983 provides a magisterial overview of this evolving early Christian perspective).

This concern with the infinite and mysterious capacity of the human subject is not the same as the popular contemporary cliché about the infinite possibilities of every person, the capacity to become whatever you want to be. The self-understanding of the Christian entails a grasp of finite possibilities, bodily limitation, unavoidable failure and the need for forgiveness and restoration. What is ‘infinite’ here is the possibility of an eternally renewed relation to God, opening out whatever finite situation we inhabit to further growth and deepening. And this also allows the believer’s self-understanding to embrace passages of extreme doubt and obscurity. The Dionysian tradition establishes the impossibility of any exhaustive description of the divine nature; but as it develops in the Middle Ages, especially in the medieval West, it increasingly moves towards an account of the experienced frustration of expectations involved in the individual’s awareness—the ‘cloud’ that obscures both the face of God and the intertwining complex of memories and self-perceptions that are brought to contemplation (Hodgson 1973, Turner 1995: 194–7). A central paradox comes into focus: to see the face of God, to be directly in the divine presence, in the heavenly sanctuary, is to be quite unable to ‘see’ God as an object, a straightforward other, over against the self. The self-awareness of the Christian in this situation is an awareness of a wholly different agency or presence, drawing the self out of itself in an endless process, which is at the same time a *lack* of anything we would normally regard as an object. God remains emphatically other, yet not *an* other—the tension crystallized by Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century when he designates God as *non aliud*, the not-other which is also ‘not the same’ (Nicholas of Cusa, *De Li Non Aliud*, tr. Hopkins, 1979). And the further step, given definitive expression in the writings of the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelites, especially St John of the Cross, is to explore and articulate the effect on the human subject of losing defined and intelligible goals and objects for the memory, the intelligence, and the will: this is the theology of the ‘dark night’, in which the habitual modes of self-awareness and of making sense of oneself are deeply and lastingly disturbed or displaced (Turner 1995: 226–51; Howells 2002: 26–31).

DOCTRINE AND LIFE

It will be clear from what has been said so far that talking about the ‘mystical’ is importantly *not* a matter of talking about a phenomenology of odd or preternatural experiences; and this remains a challenge in any attempt to theologize about this

subject. 'Mystical theology' as the term is used by—for example—St Teresa of Avila does not mean analysing a set of unusual manifestations of grace in visions or supernatural communications, even though Teresa has no qualms about reporting these in her own experience. In fact, she distinguishes between the experience of a vision and the sense of 'immersion' in God which is, she believes, the proper matter of 'mystical theology'; that is, she thinks of the 'mystical' as that which has to do with the general state of having the usual workings of the self suspended by the influx of divine agency—not a passing moment of ecstasy but a breakthrough in recognizing that the mind's frustration or the heart's confusion may be a sign of deepened transparency, vulnerability, or sensitivity to the act of God (Howells 2002: 93–118; Williams 1991: 120–40). The mystical here has to do with the way in which divine agency disrupts 'ordinary' self-awareness. But at the same time, this is understood within a framework where it is assumed that this supposedly ordinary awareness is dangerously *unnatural*, in the sense that it keeps us at a distance from what is ultimately natural for us—that is, the condition of unqualified receptivity to God's love for which we are created. The primitive Christian conviction—that the open heaven into which Jesus invites us means that we can be renewed in the likeness of unfallen humanity—is here developed in a radical way that reminds us of how far our fallen self-awareness habituates us to unreal or untrue perception (of self or world)—a theme much to the fore in the writings of some of the Greek monastic writers of the fourth century and later, especially Evagrius and Diadochus (Palmer et al. 1979: 29–71, 251–96). Dispossession is the key to an existence that is not distorted or paralysed by untruthfulness about God or myself; and this dispossession involves an acceptance of the pain of frustrated aspiration, blankness, or confusion at surface level about feelings and hopes. The calling for the Christian is to *be moved* by the act of God without simply being inactive, as if we were delegating the energy of mind and heart to another, rival, agency: we are to keep our spirits focused in active longing and love so that they may be taken into or aligned with the act of God and thus become more fully themselves in being united with God. In a fine recent monograph on the early twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Maurice de la Taille, Michon Matthiesen shows how a basic theological and metaphysical model of 'created actuation by uncreated Act' helps to make sense of both the divine agency in the Eucharist and the life of grace in the self, including that aspect of the life of grace which is supernaturally prompted and sustained contemplation (Matthiesen 2013: 213–85).

The importance of 'mystical theology' is thus profoundly connected with how we are to conceive the recreation or transfiguring of human existence in Christ. As we have seen, there is a paradox at the heart of this in the fact that only in the loss of what we might think of as intimacy or clarity do we arrive at authentic intimacy with God. (This is summarized by T. S. Eliot, paraphrasing John of the Cross, in the second of his *Four Quartets*, 'East Coker', lines 135 ff.: 'In order to arrive there / to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not / you must go by a way in which there is not ecstasy... In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not.') But it would be wrong to conclude that the mystical was therefore an essentially individual matter, to do with the purgation of each spirit in isolation. We have seen that the

earliest forms of Christian imagination were inseparable from the twofold awareness of belonging to a community chosen to speak and act for the creator within the human world, and of the Temple liturgy as a manifestation of this community's character and vocation. However much must be said about the critical function of mystical theology in the sense given it here, it cannot be isolated from these basic issues. If we are to be incorporated afresh into the people of God, according to the first Christian texts, we need to abandon the attempt to assemble a list of actions that put God in our debt; we have to recognize once and for all that God's unconditional activity cannot be moulded by our finite actions and that God's mind cannot be changed by human effort. To belong among God's people is to have let go of the idea that we can have a claim on God's favour and accept that we must be radically receptive to God's initiative. But the effect of this is not to create a single purified individual or series of individuals; it is to create a people whose lives are defined by mutual responsibility, mutual nurture, the building up of each other by selfless love. What manifests the divine life to the world is not a series of isolated saintly lives but the fact of a church in which every life is at the disposal of every other, so that each life is valued as uniquely gifted. So the 'mystical' enterprise of growing into receptivity to God's action is a growing into a transparency to God's action *towards the other*. The divine life to which we are gradually assimilated by God's gift is in the first instance the life of Jesus in his self-forgetting obedience and loving attention to the Father: as Origen characterizes it in the third century, in the lengthy meditations at the beginning of his *Commentary on John*, the eternal Word of God is the paradigm of contemplative relation to the Father (Williams 1987: 139–40). Thus the divine life we enter is always already a life turned towards the other: the *Trinitarian* life is what we receive in our entry to the heavenly sanctuary. And while it is something of a short cut to say that the common mutual life of the Christian community reflects the Trinitarian life of God (they cannot be two parallel *examples* of 'communal' existence, though there are styles of popular Trinitarian theology that come awkwardly close to suggesting this), it is true to say that the selfhood into which we are liberated by grace is a selfhood more closely analogous to the other-directedness of divine action, and thus irreducibly social and interactive.

The immediate implication of this is that there is an inextricable connection between Christology, liturgical theology, transformative social engagement, and contemplation—the sort of connection spelled out so magisterially and comprehensively by a writer like Maximus the Confessor (Thunberg 1995; Louth 1996). What holds them together is the focal image of humanity restored in its proper place in creation—as worshipping in the Spirit of Christ and out of that worship (personal and corporate) learning a new vision of self and neighbour. Theology—and therefore Christian self-understanding—fragments and drifts when this connection is weakened. What weakens it may be one or more of a variety of factors—a reductive doctrine of Christ, a loss of theological focus in thinking about Christian liturgy, a mistaken understanding of the 'interior' life as an individual exercise, and perhaps ultimately a lack of clarity about the initial impulse of the Christian gospel as a declaration of access to a 'holy place' opened to all peoples. The difficult task that faces any contemporary theologian trying to reaffirm the centrality

of the 'mystical' to theology overall is that the term has long since ceased to convey anything much of what it means in its early Christian contexts: the hidden purposes of God, the inevitability and essential importance of recognizing where our speech falls short, the paradox that, when God's hidden purpose is revealed, what becomes clearer than ever is the extent of what we cannot say. The emergence of God's purpose is the Paschal event which places human beings back at the heart of the Temple, the world itself seen as sanctuary and sacrament; but to be placed there is also to know the impossibility of sustaining the language and the relational patterns of self-interested and self-promoting individual agents, seeking mastery of their human and non-human environment. The constant resistance of the contemplative encounter with God's agency to any words that will make it manageable or predictable, capable of being domesticated within categories the ego can handle, is (among other things) what helps Christian reflection not to lose its critical and self-critical edge. Contemplation is—as a wide variety of modern instances, from the radical Russian nun Maria Skobtsova (martyred in Ravensbruck concentration camp) to the American Trappist Thomas Merton to the lesser-known but exceptionally interesting French lay contemplative and social worker Madeleine Delbrel (Skobtsova 2003; Merton 1966, 1971; Delbrel 1991, 2005) have illustrated—a calling that pushes back against the absorption of the Church into the safe identities of class or race or 'tribal' politics.

Vladimir Lossky, in the introductory chapter to his classic study of *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, sums up the task to which theology contributes: 'we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically' (Lossky 1957: 8). It is a painfully condensed summary, but what it points to is the recognition that 'mystical theology', as Lossky himself uses the term in his book, is both the condition and the result of a certain style of Christian living. If we have committed ourselves to inhabiting the space created for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are committed to a constant opening of our minds to new levels of understanding. Something has presented itself to us that requires our response, our yes or no; the possibility of living in the divine presence in a new mode. The words and formulations we devise for this 'presented' reality (the 'dogmatic' vehicles in which we speak of it, to use Lossky's language) are not going to be instruments we can use to penetrate into the inner workings of what presents itself. Yet equally they are not arbitrary or casually revisable schemata that we can ultimately ignore. As we learn to let go of our fierce impulse to contain and control, we become more patient with the fact that we are in the process not of mastering an object but of orienting ourselves in a territory; and in the course of this, we are being changed—prised away from our centredness in ourselves and our own safety or profit, and redirected towards the strangeness both of God and of the finite other, the neighbour. The practice of liturgical worship is central to this orientation and reorientation, since it is the liturgy (primarily baptism and the renewal of baptismal identity in the eucharist) that provides us with the roles we must learn to occupy as contemplators of God and

sharers in the adoring attention given by the Word to the Father. The actual labour of contemplative prayer flows from and back into this; and the compassionate service of the world, its transfiguration through the transformed identity of God's children (as in Romans 8), articulates this in practical form. As Lossky consistently argues throughout his work on Orthodox theology, apophysis is more than a conceptual move; it requires a fully personal *dispossession* of our unredeemed selfhood, a going beyond the category of the merely 'natural', the order of repetition and generality (Lossky 1974: 13–29, 120).

INTEGRATING PRAYER AND ACTION

Mystical theology is our attempt to find words for the activation of the finite self by infinite charity and infinite intelligence. As such it is bound up with the entire labour of emptying the self so as to receive that activation; and the 'labour' is inseparable from the common work of God's people, the liturgy. Its import for Christian self-understanding overall is clear; and a central aspect of this import is that it makes Christians necessarily critics of certain views of what counts as knowledge. This needs to be carefully distinguished from a claim that there is an extra *source* of knowledge that can be called 'mystical'—i.e. the idea that some true propositions are made known by supernatural communication. Theologically speaking, this may or may not be true but it is not the same as saying that the nature of the believer's commitment entails a kind of learning of the truth that is not simply a rapid and unchallengeable acquiring of new facts. The claims of mystical theology, in the sense intended by a Teresa or a Vladimir Lossky, are to do with what sort of growth has to begin in us if we are to know where and who we now are as a result of the action of God having created a fresh place and role for us. In this connection, mystical theology is significant not only for Christian but for *human* self-understanding. In a context where knowledge is habitually reduced to the acquisition of facts and solutions to determinate problems, the proposal made by the Christian consciously drawing on this heritage is that a culture that reduces or trivializes what we count as knowledge is a deeply anti-humanist one (McGilchrist 2019) and that we need for our survival, let alone our well-being, a more expansive account. We need more than simply exhortations to be generous or unselfish; we need some account of what it might be to be placed in a set of relationships which enable generosity or unselfishness because they relativize our definition of individual needs or goods. The Christian world is one in which our absolute and fundamental interdependence is asserted from the beginning; and the history of doctrine can indeed be read—as the idiosyncratic but immensely creative Anglican theologian Charles Williams argued (Williams 1939)—as a working out of the implications of this interdependence or 'coinherence' as he liked to call it. Arguments about the divine status of Christ are arguments about the nature of a transformed spiritual sensibility, not simply about the constitution of the saviour; or we could say that they are only ever the latter because of the constraints of the former. Which is why 'mystical theology' is too important to be left to be misinterpreted as the study of

what is most inaccessibly private in religious practice. In a typically mordant and visionary essay, the late Kenneth Leech warned of the risks of a new narcissism about 'spiritual' life, quoting an earlier writer's comment that a retreat *from* Christianity could take the form of a retreat *into* religion; and he argued that 'the exclusion of the mystical from mainstream Christianity' was one significant factor in this, since the mystical (and he is as cautious as anyone in using this Protean word) is what 'integrates theology, action and prayer' (Leech 2003: 131). If that integration is lacking, the 'mystical' returns as a self-conscious subdivision of religious life, readily thought of in terms of a facile opposition to community experience and public action; it becomes all too easily a path of self-cultivation, not the foundation of a practice of self-dispossession and costly availability for God and the world.

The 'mystical' is what we have to learn to speak about (tentatively) when we are driven to recognize the drastic *difference* of God's action at work; when the fabric of the familiar world is stretched thin not by obvious miraculous interruption but by events that open unlooked-for possibilities for human beings. It is not an accident that early Christian imagery around baptism and identification with Christ so often uses the language of being 'clothed' in a new identity: something that is not obviously ours is wrapped around us. This imagery is very characteristic of early Syriac Christian writing such as we encounter in the *Odes of Solomon* (Charlesworth 2009), but it is clearly intrinsic to the ceremonial of the primitive baptismal rite itself, with its stripping and reclothing (Ferguson 2009). We become different not only to ourselves but to one another, and, so the theology of the first Christians affirms, discover in this the possibility of new life together. The unseating of the ambitious ego and the 'clothing' of the naked and unprotected self with the liturgical 'vesture' of the Christ who offers perpetually the prayer of the cosmos to God the Father mean that the life of God is manifest and embodied in some measure within our history. To claim this without understanding what it is to invoke the 'mystical' at this point is to invite disaster: the mystical dimension declares unambiguously that any manifestation in history is (i) the act of God not human power or ingenuity, and (ii) marked by the self-emptying of Christ crucified. Any other foundation leads to the ultimate idolatry of claiming to possess or manage the act of God, identifying human achievement with divine presence. The mystical in this sense is the opposite of the ideological, if ideology is the claim that a finite institution, language, system of meaning or power, possesses in itself an authority that cannot be denied. The negative theology that attends an appeal to the mystical is not a denial that Christian self-understanding involves convictions about absolute truth; but it warns against reducing that truth to the dimensions we can cope with, or imagining that we can know the truth of what God has done in Christ without a radical change in our manner of learning and knowing. If we keep in view the theme that Lossky and others have underlined, the connection of negative theology with the negation of self-centred habit, the link between the *words* about God's mysteriousness and the *practice* of giving place to God's action, we may avoid some of the distortions that result from a doctrinal theology indifferent to transformation and a 'mysticism' uninterested in truth.

EXPERIENCING GOD'S FUTURE

One final dimension of the relevance of the mystical to Christian identity is that of *eschatology*. Once again, we have suffered from mechanical and unimaginative oppositions here; but the foundational model we have been considering shows the inadequacy of any such separation. As we have seen, the status of the renewed community, admitted afresh to the inmost sanctuary, is the condition of the created order at its most fully realized. The gift of the Spirit is emphatically the gift of the future state of the redeemed universe (as is clear in the use of the word *arrabon*, 'advance payment', to characterize what the Spirit gives, as in 2 Cor. 1: 22, 5: 5, and Eph. 1: 13–14). If—as the Revelation to John indicates—the final state of the redeemed universe is one where a physically separate Temple is unnecessary, where the presence of God constitutes the entire life of the city or community as a shrine (Rev. 21: 22), then wherever this presence is uninterruptedly at work will be a place where the Kingdom has arrived. The contemplative who is radically open to the act of God is in this sense an eschatological reality; but so is the Christian liturgical community as a whole. Much has been written about the eschatological character of the early eucharist (Dix 1945; Schmemmann 1987: 27–48; Cavanaugh 1998: 222–9, 268–73); and while there have been overstatements of this, it is undeniable that eucharistic worshippers were encouraged to see themselves as having ascended into heaven (hence the wording of the ancient *Sursum corda* liturgical dialogue: the congregation is exhorted to recall that their hearts are in heaven and they reply that they are already 'with the Lord', *pros ton kurion, ad Dominum*). Clearly, if and when the created order is unequivocally 'transparent' to the act of God, history as we understand it comes to an end: the universe is now in the relation it should be in to its creator. The moments or events where this is briefly realized are therefore moments that take the believer beyond the end of history. They do not in themselves abolish history or lift the community out of its actual responsibility here and now, but they show what the final goal of transformation will look like and—quite simply—declare that it is possible and imaginable.

For the Christian the presence of these eschatological signs has multiple levels of meaning. It presents the simple fact that our human life is if not interrupted then dramatically illuminated from time to time by a fullness of divine agency and immediacy that is not the result of cumulative human achievement—whether in the 'routine' arrival of presence that is the eucharistic gift or in the uncovenanted touch of contemplative intimacy that again bears no obvious relation to expectation or effort (the language of 'touch' in the depth or 'substance' of the soul is that of John of the Cross; see Howells 2002: 43–8; Matthiesen 2013: 244–7). It alerts the Christian to the fact that he or she is living out of the paradoxical presence of an already existing fullness that will be revealed in the future—in such a way that no present planned or controlled course of human action can be thought of as conditioning or causing its revelation. The unfinished character of our human faith and love is made evident by the activity, 'at an angle' to all we do or think, of the God who will be and already is all in all. It announces that both present human

failure and present human success have a tangential relation with the Kingdom, the state of full transparency to divine will and agency. All of this warns the believer against feverish striving to force the coming of the Kingdom, despair over the continuing unfaithfulness of the Church, and complacency about the Church's achievements, actual or potential. To live from the already realized future (realized in eternity, but realized also in the historical events of the cross and resurrection, where the Word's eternal presence to the Father is affirmed in the face of creation's rebellion and the attempt to obliterate the Word dwelling in history) is to live in a frame of mind or heart that is equally hopeful, sceptical, and humble—aware of the unshakeable reality that is the Word's eternal life with the Father; of the utter disproportion between this and the acts of human believers; and of the way in which human experience in this world is constantly on the edge of a manifestation beyond expectation because of this disproportion.

The beginnings of the Kingdom in us and the advance awareness of its reality (what St Paul, as we have noted, calls the presence of the spirit as *arrabon*) are thus realities that overlap with the more obviously mystical language of a Teresa or John of the Cross about 'touches of union' or similar phrases: the Christian claim is that the 'age to come', the fulfilment of creation in the presence of God and the saturation of creation with the action of God, are accessible now through faith because of what the Paschal events have effected. The community's liturgy enacts this claim, as does every authentic moment of contemplative transparency to divine action. It is important to stress the connection here: if it is overlooked or marginalized, the presence in our midst of the end of time becomes either a safe space of interiority (if we put all our emphasis on the 'mystical') or a quasi-magical realm within the world where certain symbols guarantee access to a heavenly condition (if we concentrate on the liturgical in a narrow sense). The truth is that both dimensions belong together in a full, biblically grounded theology of transformation. It is in the liturgical (especially the eucharistic) community that we are most unequivocally opened up to the divine action in us; as celebrants of the liturgy, especially the eucharistic liturgy, we step into the space that is prepared for us by Christ's historical action, which is also the space of his eternal self-giving to the Father and eternal receiving of what the Father gives. When Paul says that the Spirit makes it possible for us to say 'Abba, Father' to God, he is unlikely to be thinking simply about 'private' prayer. And equally, it is our unfolding awareness of what our personal silence and receptivity before God means that fills out in our understanding what it is to be incorporated into Christ's prayer and act.

All this may help us understand what it implies to claim that we live here and now in or rather beyond the Last Days. Whatever exactly we mean by the Last Days—and Christians have always had somewhat diverse approaches to their definition—it is possible to see how the language of 'mystical theology' allows believers to understand their present experience as a participation in the new world. When we are liturgically and contemplatively open to the act of God, so that we articulate the prayer of Christ in time and eternity, we are living in a restored world; our created identity is what God intends it to be, both at peace with the eternal Trinitarian life and at peace with other creatures (human and non-human). But we are, as human consciousnesses active in time, still

aware of the precariousness of our articulation of this; in this sense, we have not passed 'beyond' judgement. Indeed, it could be said that we are confronted more acutely and urgently with judgement, recognizing how the freedom of God within us stands at odds with all that remains untransformed in us. We continue to live in two worlds, and to sense the abrasion between them all the more acutely the more we are aware of the real transformation in the Christian community that allows us to speak about new creation in the first place. It is the tension that a text like the First Letter of John expresses: we *have* passed from death to life (1 John 3: 14), yet if we say we have no sin, there is no truth in us (1 John 1: 8). We recognize that what is happening in us is genuinely the inception of new creation; we recognize the danger of supposing that this happening is fixed and completed. The irony that the Christian believer has to manage is that any temptation to think that the divine action has pervasively transformed the praying and believing subject in this life, that the process is over, is a fairly reliable way of frustrating that divine action. 'Mystical theology' takes for granted a situation in which stasis or looking backwards will always be the enemy of grace. Even when—as in the great syntheses of the Carmelite doctors, for example—it is possible to say that 'union' is a reality, this does not mean that there is now a replacement of human agency by divine such that our freedom is no longer engaged or that no risk or crisis could possibly lie ahead. Such language simply indicates a level of penetration of divine action that irreversibly alters the disposition of the subject; but precisely what it does *not* do is to create a fixed and finished image of the transfigured self. In this life, we live both on the far side of the eschaton and its judgement and at the very hinge between the new world and the old, at the sharpest point of judgement. The 'mystical' is never a credible theological alibi for abdication of human engagement and perseverance; and in this respect what can be said about it is exactly what Paul says about the eschatological at so many points in his letters.

CONCLUSION

'Mystical theology'—granted all the proper reservations that must be entered about the vagueness of the word 'mystical' and its unhelpful associations with preternatural phenomena and extreme states—represents a fundamental dimension of Christian self-understanding. To be Christian, in the terms defined by scripture, is to be restored to the proper human place in creation; it is thus to be empowered to pray and praise as the focus of a harmonious cosmos; it is to be 'activated' by the divine energy of Christ, and to be transformed into his likeness as eternal Child of the eternal Father. The routine practices that are the basis for a visible Christian identity are practices that seek to renew this transferred and transformed life, relocating us in the place that has been secured for us by Christ. And the behaviour that flows from this is radically other than the standards of the unredeemed world, manifesting in the middle of this world the possibility that is God's Kingdom. To speak of the mystical in this sense is simply to speak of the Kingdom as it makes its way towards the centre of individual and corporate existence; not to speak

in such terms is to reduce the Kingdom to a matter of moral exhortation and Christian identity to a holding of either doctrines or ideals, rather than the inhabiting of a new place before God and in the midst of creation. The challenge of making sense of all this in a contemporary context is considerable, because of a loss of understanding of that basic theme of coming to occupy a new place, symbolized in the new identities and new speech of worship, and in the faithful commitment to radical receptivity in prayer that is the heart of contemplation. An eschatology that is either vague or dramatically mythical (raptures and millennial reigns), a sacramental theology and a spirituality that oscillate between the moralistic, the magical, and the consoling—all these militate against a rediscovery of the integral connection of sacrament, transforming action and personal exploration of a new spiritual territory in silence and wonder: the integral connection that runs through the great classical treatments of *theologia* in its full sense. Any recovery of mystical theology for our own time has to work at clarifying and celebrating this interweaving of themes that so many of our modern theological habits, reflecting, of course, our cultural habits, make difficult.

SUGGESTED READING

Barker (2011); Leech (2003); Lossky (1957); Louth (1983); McIntosh (1998); Rowland (2002), Turner (1995).

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CHAPTER 2

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AT THE HEART OF THEOLOGY

MARK A. MCINTOSH

MYSTICAL theology plays an essential role throughout the whole arc of Christian thought and life. As preparation for, consciousness of, and reflection upon the Christian community's encounter with the hidden presence of God (McGinn 1991: p. xvii), the *mystical element* in Christianity is clearly at the very heart of Christian existence and self-understanding. The fundamental reason for this is that by the name 'God', Christians mean the mystery that is not one of the things that exist but the reason why there is anything at all. Christians believe that God is not a particular item or force within the universe (but the One who holds all reality in existence moment by moment, as a singer holds her song in existence as long as she sings it); thus, Christians are obliged to expect that God can only be 'encountered' among existing beings as a kind of absence, or through signs pointing beyond themselves, or as a hidden presence—which is what the word 'mystical' means, that which is hidden, unavailable to the eyes and surpassing speech. But why should *mystical theology* per se be so central to Christianity? Why should it be essential to seek a deeper understanding, a *theological* understanding, of this hidden divine presence; why would it not be sufficient for the mystical element in Christianity to remain in the background, a stimulus to devotion perhaps, but unrelated to the unfolding doctrine of the Christian community?

This chapter offers a theological explanation for why mystical theology has played the role that it has throughout the history of Christian thought. The first section of the chapter locates mystical theology and identifies the basic theological presuppositions that make sense of its work. The second section offers a theological account of the conditions of created existence that, I will argue, seem to require mystical theology in order for reality's significance to be fully recognized and engaged. The final section turns to the theology of salvation, suggesting how Christianity has reimagined humankind's contemplative calling in Christ, and showing how that deepens the rationale for the

crucial role of mystical theology in the life of the new creation. My aim is to show that there are good theological reasons to value the insights and contributions of mystical theologians to the ongoing work of faith seeking understanding.

Without question, the particular theological strategies I shall pursue are far from being the only possible approaches. In the post-Kantian era, it would be more common to follow in the footsteps of the twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, and ground a theological rationale for mystical theology in the structures of human consciousness, which are always already summoned and responsive to the hidden reality of grace. Or from a post-modern perspective, one might naturally pursue a negative theology shaped by attention to the deferral of any totalizing meaning, or by attention to the oversaturation of meaning in the phenomena of everyday experience. Or one could draw upon the prophetic wisdom of the great variety of contextual and emancipatory theologies, developing an account of mystical theology by turning to the hidden face of God in the face of the marginalized and oppressed. Each of these approaches has much to recommend it, and indeed versions of each already exist. In choosing a different course, I by no means wish to exclude any of them. What follows, I hope, has at least this to commend it: first, that it seeks to account for mystical theology from a perspective that includes the whole cosmos of creatures and not only the human; and second, that its fundamental ideas and arguments would for the most part have been presupposed by the great majority of the thinkers and writers discussed in this volume—and in that sense, perhaps, this approach may be a helpful way of entering the conversation of these mystical teachers.

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

In this first section, I offer a broad description of mystical theology that is, I hope, congruent with its historical unfolding in all the rich diversity of practices, contexts, conceptualities, and modes of reflection that are explored within this volume. Precisely because of this great variety of its expressions, I want to provide a description of mystical theology that is synthetic enough to allow us a view of the common underlying work going on in all these forms. Glimpsing mystical theology in this way, in its fundamental theological roots, shows why it is so central to Christianity, emerging as an intensification of the most basic Christian beliefs about God and the human response to God.

The notion of mystical theology advanced in this chapter (and throughout much of this volume) derives from early traditions in the history of Christianity and seeks to reclaim that capacious and integrative understanding of mystical theology. The late medieval and early modern division of theology into various sub-specializations redefined the term ‘mystical theology’ as a newly narrowed disciplinary name for the analysis of particularly outstanding spiritual experiences, specifically those infused by

God into the souls of a special few. Furthermore, modern views of ‘mysticism’ as having chiefly to do with unusual states of an individual’s inner experience (rather than the hidden presence of God in scripture, liturgy, and creation, and the church’s reflection upon that) only reinforced the cloistering of mystical theology in isolation from the heart of Christian theology.

In the more ancient and expansive notion, we might say that mystical theology *is* the heart of Christian theology, theology gazing into the mystery at the heart of the universe, the mystery of union with God—for in this understanding God seems to have created and redeemed the universe in order to bring the creatures to share in ever greater participation in God’s own life. A. N. Williams admirably expresses this understanding of mystical theology:

In the Christian view, we are brought into intimate relation with God not in the first place by the practice of extraordinary spiritual feats, but because of who God is and who God created us to be. The heart of mystical theology lies in the relation between God and humanity, not from the perspective of what special human practices may foster right relatedness, but from the perspective of God’s creative intentions for us.

(Williams 1997: 56)

If mystical theology reflects on ‘God’s creative intentions for us’ in everything, perhaps we can intuitively sense why it would be so central to Christianity. The argument is not that mystical theology is a central niche within theology, focused exclusively on questions related to union with God, but rather that mystical theology is a way of reflecting upon the unitive motif as it resounds within *every* domain of Christian teaching. In other words, mystical theology attends to and seeks to understand the mystical presence of God in all things; it seeks to recognize and respond to that presence as a divine invitation to ever-deeper communion, an invitation inherent in the ongoing activity of creation and new creation.

Perhaps it helps if we think of mystical theology as exploring what Christians believe to be the continual drawing of human existence towards a reality beyond our grasp, and the strange, paradoxical way in which this fulfilment of humanity can only come as a gift from beyond humanity—a gift that nonetheless enlists and enables human activity towards the fulfilment that the divine gift makes possible. Thomas Aquinas analyses this paradox structuring human existence in this way:

Our happiness or felicity is twofold.... One is proportionate to human nature, and this we can reach through our own resources. The other, a happiness surpassing our nature, we can attain only by the power of God, by a kind of participation in the Godhead.... So to be sent to this happiness beyond nature, we have to be divinely endowed with some additional sources of activity... called theological virtues.

(*Summa Theologiae* I-II 62.2; tr. Dominican Fathers of the English Province 1981)

For Thomas, this invitation to ‘participation in the Godhead’ is the mystical motive at work in everything that is, for the beatitude to which Thomas believes God invites

humankind is not instead of but a feature of the perfection of the *whole universe*. Crucially for our purposes, Thomas thinks that for human beings to play their particular role in this journey towards sharing in the divine life, central human capacities such as thinking and willing need to be imbued with a divine strength: the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love keep human thinking and willing on track towards their ultimate fulfilment in God.

In simplest terms, we might put the pertinent Christian beliefs this way: in order to bring creation to its consummate happiness, a sharing in the divine life, God must communicate to creatures something of the reality of that happiness in order to guide and sustain them along the way. For this beatitude is in fact God's own happiness, God's own existence, and so it inevitably remains beyond the full grasp of creaturely reason or achievement. And thus, Christians believe, just as creatures can only come to this sharing of divine life because God freely gives it to them, so also in this world they can have the merest inkling of such a destiny only as God draws creatures to a preliminary share in God's own self-knowledge—a sharing that in this world, Christians believe, takes the form of faith.

Yet in communicating thus with humanity, God must use the 'language' of our present to draw us into hopeful converse about our future: scripture especially, but also worship and the struggle for justice, history, cultural imagery, spiritual longings, physical sensations, the sheer existence of things, even the present world itself, and above all the faces of the marginalized—all these may become ways in which God speaks hiddenly of a world radically transfigured and recreated. As Aquinas remarks: 'just as a human person can use words or construct images in order to signify something, so God uses the actual course of events which are subject to his providence in order to signify something' (*Quodlibetal questions* 7.6.3; as translated in Bauerschmidt 2013: 66). God wields even the events of this world's history in order 'to signify something' of a world divinely recreated, in which God will be the very life that creation leads. Coming to understand something of this hidden depth of meaning in all things does present mystical theology with a very large task indeed; yet its work is guided by a fundamental Christian conviction: that the divine communication, mystically present in the very giving of all things to be themselves, is love, a beckoning to share in that inexhaustibly giving life which is God the Trinity.

This means that theology has an inherently mystical dimension in at least two senses: first, theology must seek to discern the mystical 'more' of God's self-communication in all things which gives them their existence precisely as signs; and second, theology can only begin to understand something of this fullness of divine meaning as God draws theology into a provisional sharing in the Trinitarian knowing and loving in which God's meaning lives. This second aspect of mystical theology will thus, at least on occasion, become something like a spiritual exercise, opening the thinking of the mystical theologian towards *theoria* or contemplation—in which reflection upon Christian teachings and practices becomes a transformative encounter with truth itself. As Pierre Hadot has shown, ancient philosophy and early Christian theology both presupposed this contemplative trajectory within the process of learning; Hadot sets in historical context what now appear to us to be abstract ideas or teachings in many ancient

philosophical and theological texts, and shows that they were never meant to be ends in themselves, but were in fact designed to be pondered as a kind of exercise leading to a transformation of one's mind and a new level of insight (Hadot 1995: 81–144). In this sense, we might say that, in this second moment or aspect, mystical theology develops fundamental teachings of Christianity not so much as teachings *about* God but as a way of training the mind to attend upon God—fostering access to another level of consciousness in which the reality to which the teachings point becomes more available through the transformation of the one who seeks understanding.

While this dimension of mystical theology may seem somewhat anomalous in contemporary academic theology, to minimize it would distort our understanding of the nature and role of mystical theology throughout the history of Christian thought. Moreover, in our own day a growing interdisciplinary literature in contemplative studies not only commends contemplative practices in the classroom as catalysing deeper levels of student learning, but also suggests important arguments about the valid role of contemplative understanding as a mode within academic scholarship today (Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011; Barbezat and Bush 2014).

It might be helpful, nonetheless, to clarify a bit more the point of this second dimension of mystical theology. For the point of this more contemplative moment, this spiritual-theological exercise, is emphatically *not* to circumvent the mind's search for understanding and replace it with an appeal to some special state of inner experience. Yet for the reasons I have mentioned, theology's difficulty is to reflect upon the divine self-communication by means of an understanding inevitably shaped by our experience of this world—which means an understanding for which the inexhaustible goodness of God is barely imaginable, and an understanding likely to have been hurt and constrained by our experience of the world's brokenness. As Hadot suggests, however, it is possible to exercise the mind in ways that deliver it in some degree from its native biases, from the limitations imposed by its own lack of self-awareness, or from its unconscious tendency to reify in terms familiar to itself realities that it could more fully understand were it to allow them more agency in communicating themselves on their own terms.

So what happens in mystical theology? Perhaps the words of a mystical theologian, here William of St Thierry, reflecting upon his own theological life would be helpful just as one preliminary example:

When the object of thought is God and the things which relate to God and the will reaches the stage at which it becomes love, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, at once infuses himself by way of love and gives life to everything, lending his assistance in prayer, in meditation or in study to human weakness. Immediately the memory becomes wisdom and tastes with relish the good things of the Lord, while the thoughts to which they give rise are brought to the intellect to be formed into affections. The understanding of the one thinking becomes the contemplation of the one loving.

(William of St Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, §249; tr. Berkeley 1980)

Note here the lovely reciprocity between the toiling mind and the gracious interventions of quick-eyed love: three times in this brief passage the mind's thought of God kindles the will to affection, so that love, overtaking and lending ardour to thought, becomes a

channel for the Holy Spirit who then ‘gives life to everything.’ What I have spoken of as the two dimensions or moments of mystical theology are both fully evident here: the work of the mind, conceiving something of the mysterious divine truth; and also the moment when the mind, kindled by the thought of God’s goodness, is drawn into contemplation and is caught up by God’s own delight, the Holy Spirit, into God’s own self-understanding—the moment when ‘the understanding of the one thinking becomes the contemplation of the one loving.’

William helps us to see how the two dimensions of mystical theology flow from the fundamental structure of faith itself. In the Christian understanding of religious belief, faith is an act of the *mind* reaching out to understand something of the divine self-communication, and this act of the mind must be sustained and inspired by the *will* as it is kindled into love by a sense of God’s goodness. It is not the case, in either faith or mystical theology, that the mind is somehow supplanted by the will or desire; but rather the mind is set free from the temptation to shrink the object of its search to the limits of its present understanding, and it is the will’s profound awareness of the reality and goodness of the mind’s goal that inspires the mind genuinely to listen to, and learn from, and truly understand its object.

I emphasize all this simply because I think it may help us to understand better the second or more contemplative moment of mystical theology. The first moment, in which the mystical theologian seeks to discern and understand something of the hidden divine meaning communicated by God in all things—this dimension is not so far from many ordinary scholarly endeavours: seeking to interpret deeper levels of a poet’s meaning, for example. But the second moment may seem more unusual, in which the mystical theologian, reflecting upon the details of the divine self-sharing, finds that the thinking of these thoughts may become a contemplative awareness of the One about whom the theologian had been thinking. It is not that the more discursive thoughts *about* God are rejected, but rather that the intensity of insight they convey is subsumed within an awareness of a much greater intensity—much as light from lamps lit within a room is subsumed once dawn has come and sunlight floods the room.

It’s important not to discount the rich theological contributions that mystical theologians are stretching to express in these more intuitive aspects of their work. This is especially true when deep encounter with a reality beyond easy conceptualization leads mystical theologians to employ powerful literary strategies such as a super-abundance of dialectical imagery, or heightened, poetic, or visionary language—sometimes drawing upon a metaphorical range of intense emotional states, profound intimacy, or personal narrative. Such passages may tempt us to locate their meaning in speculative reconstructions of possible experiential backgrounds ‘behind’ the text; but that approach can often end up obscuring, or even disregarding entirely, the theological insights that the mystical theologian worked so hard to teach through the particular language they have chosen as most apt. A more adequate interpretive stance might analyse how the literary strategies at work in the text could be designed to shape the readers’ own encounters with theological reality. Perhaps the analogy here would be with performative texts such

as parables or ritual language, which certainly communicate theological insights though they deploy non-discursive genres as fostering a deeper kind of understanding.

So far from being an esoteric preserve for the spiritually gifted, mystical theology simply intensifies the normal, ordinary work of theology reflecting upon Christian faith—of the mind's search for deeper understanding, which is inspired and likely transformed as the will reaches out in personal encounter with the goodness of the reality it seeks to understand.

Having offered something of a heuristic description of mystical theology, I now turn more directly to the theological reasons for its contribution at the heart of Christian theology.

THE MYSTICAL DEPTHS OF CREATION: THE NEED FOR MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

What kind of universe requires something like a mystical theology in order for the deepest meaning of each being to be recognized and understood? In this section I will suggest that mystical theology emerges with such a central role in the development of Christianity because Christianity itself arises within a created order whose very existence and structure, Christians believe, signify the Creator. What do I mean by this? To clarify, I am *not* arguing that the development of a Christian theology of creation is the historical cause for the emergence of mystical theology; rather I am suggesting that the theology of creation provides an important theological rationale for why mystical theology could have such significance in Christianity. It helps us to understand, in other words, how to hold together two important points: first, that Christians quickly came to believe that in the crucified and risen existence of Jesus, God's action and meaning were hidden, but also revealed by that very hiddenness; and second, that Christians could also come to think that if God might speak not just through the words of a human agent, like a prophet, but through and as the very existence of a creature, then there must be some basis upon which all creaturely existence and experience might be the expression of God's mystical communication.

Consider a paradigmatic instance of how these intertwined convictions come to fruition. Augustine and Monica in their mutual vision at Ostia reach the climactic point at which they long for all creatures to fall silent so that 'he alone would speak not through them but through himself', then at last 'him who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation' (*Confessions* 9.10.25; tr. Chadwick 1991: 172). For Augustine, following John's Gospel, it is the eternal Word through whom God calls the whole creation into existence; and the intense longing of the vision at Ostia underscores Augustine's conviction that this same Word who calls the creatures into existence never ceases to speak mystically at the ground of every creature. Origen

had already begun to work out the need for a mystical theology as a result of this divine communication in the creatures; adopting an ancient Mediterranean pedagogical scheme, Origen proposed (*Commentary on the Song of Songs: Prologue*; tr. Lawson 1956: 43–4) that the first level of spiritual advance would require a close attention to ethical life in order for one to realize sufficient interior freedom for the second stage, which was precisely the practice of contemplating the speaking of the Word in and through the created order, thus preparing one finally for an unmediated contemplation of the Word directly—a sequence that offers intriguing points of comparison to the pattern of ascent at Ostia.

Augustine, of course, famously struggled with the divinely imbued power of creaturely expressivity, its beautiful capacity, precisely as sign pointing to God, to arouse such desire in human beholders as to incite a premature foreclosure of creaturely meaning (as intended by God)—human concupiscence thus distorting and shrinking the divine meaning within the bounds of human grasping. Perhaps with this danger in mind, in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (1.4.9; tr. Taylor 1982: 23) Augustine portrays the act of creation as a continual calling and conversion of the creatures by the Word towards their full and true form of existence in himself—the Word, as perfect expression of the Father, being the ground of the creatures’ own truth and expressive existence. In fact Augustine sees the primordial calling of the creature into its true form of existence in the Word as needing to be *sustained* in the form of a mystical address within the creature, continually summoning it towards its own true existence: the Word and Wisdom of God ‘would certainly not cease to speak by interior inspirations and summons to the creature of which He is the beginning, in order that it might turn to its First Cause’ (1.5.10, tr. Taylor 1982: 24). Augustine, acutely aware both of the creatures’ meaningfulness as divine speech but also of the danger of rational creatures falling away from that divine meaning, underscores the mystical (and thus easily missed or distorted) presence of the Creator within the creatures. This suggests to me his sense that the creation itself calls for something like the work of mystical theology to clarify the community’s understanding of the divine meaning and to hold that theological understanding open to the cleansing and perfecting divine teaching.

While some mystical writers emphasized the continual mystical communication of God as the very depths of the creatures, others explored a different metaphor for pondering the creation as mystical divine speech—pointing equally for the need of mystical theology in virtue of the very nature of creation itself, as in this rich passage from Hugh of St Victor (d. 1142):

For this whole sensible world is like a kind of book written by the finger of God, that is created by divine strength, and each creature is like a kind of letter, not established by human convention, but instituted through divine judgment to demonstrate and in a kind of way to signify the unseen wisdom of God. For just as an uneducated person might see an open book, look at the shapes, but does not recognise the letters, thus a foolish and animal person, who does not grasp those things that are of God, sees a form in these external visible creatures, but does not grasp reasoning; a

spiritual person however can discern all things, in that from the outside he considers the beauty of the work, but from within he grasps how wonderful is the wisdom of the Creator. (*De tribus diebus* 4.3; tr. Poirel 2002)

Several points are particularly noteworthy for our purposes: first, Hugh's insistence that the creatures' meanings are not simply human constructs but are living expressions of divine intention and therefore require a special gift of understanding; and by likening this additional depth of understanding to the ability to read, Hugh readily engages us in the wonder that such a discovery within the creatures' depths would evoke. An unlettered person might be superficially entranced by the fine calligraphy of a manuscript, but one with the ability to read would suddenly find the letters and words leading one into wonderful and perhaps unexpected depths of meaning; what, Hugh incites us to ask, might we be missing of the Author's meaning in the creatures all around us? In this context, mystical theology might be conceived as the Christian community's developing capacity to 'read' the most fundamental text.

I am arguing then that Christians certainly understood themselves to be living in a world charged with divine meaning and requiring particular abilities to discern and interpret and respond to this meaning. But what are the conditions for this possibility, what is it about the universe that, in light of the incarnation, leads Christians towards mystical theology? We can better understand this belief in the inherently mystical quality of the created order, and the consequent need for something like mystical theology to interpret it, by focusing on two key aspects of the Christian theology of creation: first, the mystery of infinite divine self-giving at the heart of every creature's existence; and second, the inherently communicative dynamism within all creatures in virtue of their Trinitarian ground. Together, I suggest, these dimensions of the Christian understanding of creation help provide a rationale that accounts for the possibility of mystical theology, and why it was felt to be so fundamental in the development of Christian life and thought.

In virtue of being created, every existing being, Christians believe, flows from an infinite abyss of inexhaustible intelligibility, God. But just because God is indeed *inexhaustibly* intelligible, and thus beyond created comprehension, this means that every creature's ground, its coming-to-be moment by moment from God, marks a profoundly apophatic dimension at its heart. To be a creature is to stand forth, in every second, out of an overwhelming infinity of divine reality that can only dazzle and darken the eye of all creaturely knowing. In this sense, the doctrine of creation requires the mystical in order even to recognize the truth of creaturely existence.

Furthermore, we can also consider this standing forth of the creatures from God in terms of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, namely that on the 'other side' of every creature lies sheer non-existence, and not pre-existing matter in some indeterminate state of being. In other words, there is nothing there, prior to the creature's present existence, which another being could grasp and so form a background horizon by means of which to understand the creature. Moreover, the creature's appearing out of this non-existence is, at each moment, a continuous mystery that is beyond the full comprehension of the

creature itself or its fellow beings. And this, just of itself, is remarkable and worthy of further elucidation, for it underscores the infinite significance, vulnerability, and startling graciousness inherent in the existence of each creature, called forth as it is continually from radical nothingness.

We can find a particularly clear statement of the creation out of nothing doctrine in Thomas's *Disputed Questions on the Power of God* (Q. 5, art. 1): 'Without any doubt whatever it must be admitted that things are preserved in existence by God, and that they would instantly be reduced to nothing were God to abandon them' (resp.; tr. Dominican Fathers 2004). And indeed Thomas further argues that this creative activity of God by which creatures come to be is the same action that sustains them in existence at each moment: 'God's action which is the direct cause of a thing's existence is not distinct as the principle of its being and as the principle of its continuance in being'. Let me suggest two crucial implications of this doctrine.

First, in Thomas's approach, the creatures are brought and held by God into existence *continuously*. This means that each creature represents, at every single moment of its being, an unfathomable and incomprehensibly mysterious epiphany, an instantaneous and continuous leap from nothingness into being. No matter how tiny or humble a creature is, how apparently negligible or uninterestingly understandable it is in the minds of fellow creatures, it still marks an awe-inspiring and unknowable appearing. In other words, we are not talking about a difference between one finite sort of existence and another—from wolf into dog, say—but rather about the infinite difference between nothingness and existence *per se*. If each creature's existence were somehow simply measurable in terms of the kind of being it is, in terms of its particular way of existing, then in principle at least, more and more creatures would be knowable as we worked out the genetic differences and all the other factors that distinguish each kind of thing from others. But we are *not* talking about that when we look at beings as creatures, for we are not talking about a measurable difference within the plane of things that exist. Rather we are talking about a continuous and instantaneous and infinite transition—indeed we can only analogically speak of the creature's standing forth as a 'transition' at all. As Etienne Gilson observed regarding Thomas's view: 'the production of even a finite *esse* [act of existence] requires an infinite power, because between existence and nothingness, there is an infinite chasm which only such an infinite power can bridge' (Gilson 1949/1952: 90). So every creature really ought to induce a kind of reverential apophysis, a wondering running-out of speech, in the presence of a reality that, continuously and by its very existence, represents an infinite crossing.

A second implication from the creation *ex nihilo* doctrine, already hinted at, is that at the ground of every creature we are confronted not only by a finite sign of an infinite act, but an act that is solely God's act, unmediated and directly. This divine activity is intimately present within each creature; God as the pure act of existence is innermost in things, causing them to exist just as, says Thomas, fire is in things causing them to ignite:

God causes this effect [i.e. existence] in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as

long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things. . . . Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost. (ST I.8.1)

Perhaps we could say that God's intimate presence in creatures, like fire in whatever burns, is another reason why creatures are inherently mystical; that is, they not only mark an infinite and ineffable crossing from nothingness into existence, but they do so because of the radically unknowable giving of God at their core, freely granting them to be. Moreover, as Christian theology has unhesitatingly affirmed, God in causing each creature to be does not act according to any necessity but purely according to the free act of God's will. Creatures, in other words, are never exhaustibly reducible to any set of knowable natural causes, for at the core of their existing, in and through and beyond all the finite and knowable aspects of their life, lies the free and *inexhaustible* decision of the divine love that each creature should really be. Thus, precisely in being the particular creature that each being is, it is always also a communication of the eternal divine delight that it should be.

And this brings us directly to the more overtly Trinitarian ground of the creatures. As Gilles Emery observes, the processions of the Trinity are, in Thomas's view, the cause of the procession of the creatures (and Emery offers over twenty citations throughout Thomas's writings; see Emery 2007: 122ff.). To offer one example:

The divine Persons, according to the nature of their processions, have a causality respecting the creation of things. . . . God is the cause of things by his intellect and will, just as the craftsman is cause of the things made by his craft. Now the craftsman works through the word conceived in his mind, and through the love of his will regarding some object. Hence also God the Father made the creature through his Word, which is his Son; and through his Love, which is the Holy Spirit. (ST I.45.6)

Thus, there is a mystical depth to creatures not simply in respect of their sheer existence, but, even more marvellously, because of their intelligibility and cherishability as beings who come forth as the gift of God's eternal knowing and loving of Godself. Therefore, the mysterious and infinite depth at the ground of every creature, the sign that it flows directly from the unknowable self-giving of the act of existence, simultaneously expresses the infinite communication of Trinitarian life, which is existence itself. Indeed, it might well be argued that an awareness of this perfect reciprocity within creation between the supremely self-sharing communication of the Trinity and the incomprehensible giving of existence gives rise to the important dialectic of cataphatic and apophatic in mystical theology.

For Thomas, the Trinitarian ground of the creation authorizes the theological exploration of creation's beauty and the mystical significance of that: 'As a work of art manifests the art of the artisan, so the whole world is nothing else than a certain representation of the divine wisdom conceived within the mind of the Father' (*Commentary on the Gospel of St John* 5.3; tr. Weisheipl and Larcher 1980). The pervasive sense that

creation is in some way inherently representational and symbolic would be an important stimulus in fostering a profound awareness of the need for mystical theology. This view of creation reaches a particularly sophisticated articulation in the theology of Bonaventure. Because the Word is the perfect expression of the Father, and because the world is created through this same Word, the world not only expresses the Word who is its exemplar but also, in its inner structure, ceaselessly represents the Word's *own* expressive or exemplary quality: 'The cosmic order, in its totality and in its parts, is a vast symbol in which God speaks his own mystery into that which is not himself. But the symbol is meant to be read and interpreted' (Hayes 1976: 316).

For Bonaventure this profoundly mystical or symbolic dimension of the creatures is disclosed precisely through the incarnate Word, who restores the hidden exemplarity within the created order by assuming it into union with himself. Bonaventure describes his master Francis as one who, through his fidelity to the incarnate Word, is able to interpret mystical meaning within the great creation-symbol:

Aroused by all things to the love of God, he rejoiced in all the works of the Lord's hands and from these joy-producing manifestations he rose to their life-giving principle and cause. In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself and through his vestiges imprinted on creation he followed his Beloved everywhere, making all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace Him who is utterly desirable. With a feeling of unprecedented devotion he savoured in each and every creature—as in so many streams—that Goodness which is their fountain source.

(*Major Life* 9.1; tr. Cousins 1978: 263)

For Bonaventure, of course, the poverty of Francis and his profound interior freedom are precisely what make it possible for him to recognize and respond in a non-possessive way to the beauty of the creatures, and so avoid silencing within them the mystical expressivity of the Word. In this sense, one might argue, Bonaventure presents Francis as a radical exemplar for the task of mystical theology.

There is a further aspect to the Trinitarian theology of creation that can help us understand the background rationale for mystical theology, in particular for the strong sense that each creature is not only in its hidden depths an *expression* of the divine communication from which it flows, but that in a certain way, at its truest heart, each creature is united with God. At least from the time of Philo (c.25 BCE–c.50 CE), Jewish and Christian thinkers had begun to interpret the biblical references to Wisdom's role in creation as alluding to the intelligence and freedom of the divine creative act. The Word by which the universe would come to be in time, in this view, bears eternally within itself the divine exemplars of all the creatures-to-be. The development of Trinitarian doctrine in early Christianity ensured that the Word or Wisdom of God would not be considered according to a subordinationist model, but as co-equal with the Father and Spirit. And thus the archetypal or exemplar existence of the creatures within the eternal Word would be a hidden, eternal presence of the creatures-to-be within God, as the divine

ideas of themselves. We can see a particularly clear account of this understanding in Augustine on John 1: 4 ('in him was life'):

A carpenter makes a box. First he has the box in design [i.e. as a mental blueprint, an idea in the mind, of what he wants to make]; for if he had it not in design, how could he produce it by workmanship? But the box in theory is not the very box as it appears to the eyes.... Behold, it is made in the work; has it ceased to exist in design? The one is made in the work, and the other remains which exists in design.... The actual box is not life, the box in design is life; because the soul of the artificer, where all these things are before they are brought forth, is living. So, dearly beloved, because the Wisdom of God, by which all things have been made, contains everything according to design before it is made, therefore those things which are made through this design itself are not life, but whatever has been made is life in Him.

(*On the Gospel of John* 1.17; ed. Schaff 1986)

The artisan's box comes to exist in the world according to his idea of it, but subject as it is to the wear and tear of time, it may need to be restored or even remade according to this same idea if it should be hurt or damaged. Augustine's point here is that it is precisely the imperishable existence of God's idea of the creature that both grounds the creature's existence and also its true life, its possibility of recreation, for it exists most vivaciously and perfectly in God.

We can see a very similar perspective in the thought of Maximus the Confessor. Because the Word bears eternally within himself the ideas or *logoi* of each creature, it would be possible through the spiritual journey in Christ to reconnect with the restorative truth of oneself as it has been eternally known and loved in God.

Because [the *Logos*] held together in himself the *logoi* before they came to be... Surely then, if someone is moved according to the *Logos*, they will come to be in God, in whom the *logos* of their being pre-exists.... They ascend to the *Logos* by whom they were created and in whom all things will ultimately be restored.

(*Ambiguum* 7; tr. Blowers and Wilken 2003: 54–6)

We could consider many further examples of this perspective from throughout the Christian tradition, but the fundamental matter for our purpose here is simply this: to exist as a creature at all, means to express in time and space this infinite intimacy with God (as an idea in the Mind of God) from which each creature flows. Thomas evokes this mystical ground of every creature, sustained eternally within the life of the Trinity:

As the Father speaks himself and every creature by his begotten Word, inasmuch as the Word begotten adequately represents the Father and every creature; so he loves himself and every creature by the Holy Spirit, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit proceeds as the love of the primal goodness whereby the Father loves himself and every creature. (*ST* I.37.2 *ad* 3)

Thus, the creature in time is the expression of this eternal event of knowing and loving by which God knows and loves Godself and all the ways in which the creatures will come to participate in the gift of existence. Thus, the divine ideas tradition, which was ubiquitous in Christian thought before modernity, energized the sense that every creature bears within itself a mystical depth whose truth and full significance demands the work of mystical theology.

Aquinas in his reflection on the Word as the eternal 'truth event', the eternally perfect expression of the Father, also ponders what we could see as the generative mystical significance of this eternal archetypal existence of the creatures in God:

The intellection of the Word is his act of existence, and so is the likeness of the things he possesses. Therefore, a likeness of a creature existing in the Word is also his life. Similarly, this likeness of the creature is, in a way, the creature itself—that is, in the same way that the soul is said to be, in some fashion, all things. Consequently, because the likeness of a creature existing within the Word in some way produces the creature and moves it as it exists in its own nature, the creature, in a sense, moves itself, and brings itself into being; that is, in view of the fact that it is brought into being, and is moved by its likeness existing in the Word. Thus, the likeness of a creature in the Word is, in a certain sense, the very life of the creature itself.

(Disputed Questions on Truth, 4.8 [reply]; Mulligan 1954/1994)

It is this mystical presence of the creature-to-be (its exemplar reason) in the Word, that continually 'produces the creature and moves it' in its finite, temporal existence. In a sense we could say that this deep mystical truth of the creature is its imperishable veracity and life.

Moreover, this same insight could also be seen as undergirding the profoundly apophatic mystical theology of Meister Eckhart. We see, for example, how it sheds light on the deeply startling language of his famous German Sermon 52:

When I stood in my first cause, I then had no 'God,' and then I was my own cause. . . . But when I went out from my own free will and received my created being, then I had a 'God' For in the same being of God where God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was, there I willed myself and committed myself to create this man. Therefore I am the cause of myself in the order of my being, which is eternal, and not in the order of my becoming, which is temporal. And therefore I am unborn, and in the manner in which I am unborn I can never die. In my unborn manner I have been eternally, and am now, and shall eternally remain.

(Sermon 52; tr. Colledge and McGinn 1981: 200, 202–3)

Following Thomas here, Eckhart refers to the divine idea or principal existence of himself existing in God; whereas Thomas, as we have just seen, considers this exemplar reason to be in a very real sense producing and moving the creature, Eckhart brilliantly discloses the full significance of this mystical element in Trinitarian thought for the journey of the soul. This could almost be said to be a crucial feature in the Meister's

understanding of the mystical life, for until believers are awakened by the Word to this deep mystical truth of themselves and all things in God, they have little sense of the authentic orientation and stance which their lives should take.

RECONCILIATION, CONTEMPLATION, AND THE ROLE OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

The final step in the argument I have been making is simply to remind us that mystical theology, as the aspect of Christian theology that considers God's will to draw all creation into deeper communion, has a particular aptness for discerning and, to the extent possible, collaborating with the unfolding of God's reconciling work in the world. I'm suggesting, in other words, that Christians understood that it was not enough for mystical theology to discern the depth of God's meaning in all things—because, for Christians, God's hidden meaning in all things reaches its consummate expression in the healing and perfecting of them in Christ; so mystical theology necessarily includes the contemplative holding of this deep truth of things into its recreation in God.

In portraying a theological rationale for the significance of mystical theology, I emphasized the ways in which Christian thinkers perceive the creation as always both a disclosure and a veiling—an act of divine speech that both awakens the human desire to understand, and also leads human consciousness beyond the human conception of things towards their fullest meaning in God. Perhaps we could even say that this is the fundamental mystical pattern or momentum in the created order: creatures as moments of divine communication whose fullest meaning summons human consciousness to a negation or relinquishment of present understandings in order to be drawn into an unimaginably greater reality. It is no coincidence that this pattern (affirmation, negation, transcendence), seemingly intrinsic to the created order, lends its shape to the very structure of mystical theology—and should be acutely embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Christians, of course, the same Word who communicates divine meaning at the ground of every creature reaches consummate expression in the incarnation and paschal mystery. Given this deep constitutive shaping of mystical theology by the mysteries of creation and salvation, it is natural that mystical theology should play a central role in Christian theological life.

We can see signs of soteriology's influence on mystical theology if we consider how Christianity reshaped an important common inheritance of the Mediterranean world in which Christian theology developed: this was the view that humankind has a contemplative calling, that humans as rational beings only lead a life worth living if they ascend from mere appearances to the realities that explain appearances, and from opinion and conventional views to genuine understanding—if they contemplate the *truth* of things. The Christian conviction that the definitive expression of God's own life and truth in the world is embodied in Christ led to a profound reframing of the human contemplative

calling. Whether one conceived the intelligible truth of things—the ultimate object of contemplation—as dwelling in the imperishable world of the forms, or as in-forming each individual material being, Christian theology radically reinterpreted the locus of intelligible truth in a fundamentally Trinitarian manner (as we saw in the previous section): the intelligible truth of all reality flows from God’s eternal knowing of Godself, including all the ways in which creatures would come to participate in God’s gift of existence—the divine act of self-knowing that Christians call the eternal begetting of the Word. As Thomas puts it:

A house is said to be true that expresses the likeness of the form in the architect’s mind; and words are said to be true in so far as they are the signs of truth in the intellect. In the same way natural things are said to be true in so far as they express the likeness of the species that are in the divine mind. For a stone is called true, which possesses the nature proper to a stone, according to the preconception in the divine intellect. (*ST I.16.1*)

Thomas’s references here to the ‘divine mind’ or ‘intellect’ of course refer to the Word, thus the intelligible truth of the creatures rests in this infinite inner-Trinitarian event of knowing, for it is by the imperishable idea of every creature conceived in the Word that it comes to be in its created existence—and by which it may be recreated in its perfect truth.

Augustine’s meditation on the angels in the beginning of creation offers a particularly fine example of this relocation of the intelligible truth of things within the divine mind, and the consequent repatterning of the contemplative calling—and even for Augustine, perhaps, an implicit model for the work of mystical theology itself.

The holy angels...always behold the face of God and rejoice in His Word, the only-begotten Son, equal to the Father; and in them first of all wisdom was created. They, therefore, without any doubt know all creation, of which they are the creatures first made, and they have this knowledge first in the Word of God Himself, in whom are the eternal reasons of all things made in time, existing in Him through whom all things have been created. And they have this knowledge in creation itself, as they look down upon it and refer it to the praise of Him in whose immutable truth they behold, as in the source of all creation, the reasons by which creatures have been made.

(*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.24.41, tr. Taylor 1982: 132)

Augustine portrays the angels with wondering admiration, perhaps hoping to stir his readers to emulate the unhesitating contemplative offering they make of creation: beholding the deep truth of every creature in its earthly life, the angels immediately refer the creature in praise to God—their contemplation becoming an offering to God that sustains the creatures in unity with their eternal truth. Because angels are capable of contemplating directly in the Word the divine idea by which each creature is itself, angels are able to foster the welfare and community of creation by building up the replenishing identity between the creature in its mundane existence in time and its imperishable fullness and beauty as a divine idea in the Word.

The general consensus among Christians has been that, while in this mortal life, humans cannot, like the angels, contemplate directly the divine ideas of the creatures existing eternally in the Word. And yet human beings also have a crucial role in linking the mundane existence of creatures with God. In fact, we might almost say that this Christian vision of the human contemplative calling inevitably requires the work of mystical theology. As Aquinas explains, 'Augustine, for the ideas defended by Plato, substituted the types of all creatures existing in the divine mind, according to which types all things are made in themselves, and *are known to the human soul*' (ST I.84.5; my emphasis). As Thomas goes on to say, while human beings cannot see the divine ideas or types themselves directly, for this would after all be to see the divine essence itself, it is by *means* of the divine ideas that human beings are able to know the truth of creatures. For the power of God's eternal knowing of the truth of all things in the Word (according to their types or divine ideas) is the light of Truth itself, which illuminates every creaturely act of understanding.

The human soul knows all things in the eternal types. . . . For the intellectual light itself which is in us, is nothing else than a participated likeness of the uncreated light, in which are contained the eternal types. (ST I.84.5)

For Thomas, there are two aspects to every act of human understanding: there is the impression of an object delivered by our senses to our mind, and there is the power of our mind—which Thomas calls the 'intellectual light itself which is in us'—to bring forth from this sense impression the idea or intelligible form of the thing it considers, and so to know it. Remarkably, however, Thomas is saying that this power or light of our minds, by which we are able to know the truth of things, is in fact nothing less than God giving us a share in *God's* power to see that truth ('the uncreated light, in which are contained the eternal types'). It is God granting us a likeness, a participation in that power or light, allowing us to bring forth from our senses the idea of the creature that coheres with the same idea in the divine mind—for that *is* its truth. So every time humankind seeks to know and contemplate the truth of things, we open finite reality to an echo, a mystical mediation, of God's knowing of the truth of all things in the Word.

This eternal truth of each creature, perfectly understood and cherished in its Author, is not only the archetype by which the creature is formed in time but also its unvanquishable reality by which it may be restored and upheld against whatever lies, prejudices, or demeaning cruelties may seek to dominate it in this world. Thus, at least in part, the contemplative calling of humankind is to hold the truth of every creature, patiently and reverently, open towards God's knowing of it. For whatever the world may say about a creature, that will never be the last word about it; as Thomas observes, there is another Word who bears each creature's truth: 'Since God by understanding himself understands all other things. . . . The Word conceived in God by his understanding of himself must also be the Word of all things' (*Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.13.6; tr. O'Neil 1957/1975).

And if, as Christians believe, the Word who bears the truth of all creatures became incarnate in order to rescue and vindicate the true goodness and beauty of all they might have been and, in Christ, might yet become, then mystical theology's task is urgently

central: for to contemplate the intelligible truth of God in everything is to assist in the work of liberating the creation from the world's mendacious distortions and damaging misuse. We catch a glimpse of this in an extraordinary passage from Bonaventure, in which he considers the maternal labour of the Wisdom or Word of God as the mode by which the creatures are given their true birth, and their reality restored in harmony with God's eternal knowing of them:

In eternal Wisdom there is a principle of fecundity tending to the conceiving, the bearing, and the bringing forth of everything.... For all the exemplar reasons are conceived from all eternity in the womb or uterus of eternal Wisdom.... And as it conceived them from all eternity so also it produced or bore [them] in time, and later, gave birth [to them] by suffering in the flesh.

(*Collations on the Six Days* 20.5; tr. de Vinck 1970)

Bonaventure seems here to suggest that, just as divine Wisdom eternally conceived the exemplar reasons for all creatures and could therefore call them into time and space in their finite expressions, so also Wisdom incarnate—always bearing the exemplar reasons—is able by the labour of 'suffering in the flesh' to bring the eternal truth of the creatures to birth in a new creation.

Let me build on Bonaventure's thought here: throughout his earthly ministry, the gospels portray Jesus as holding elements of the created order—vessels of water, inadequate amounts of loaves and fishes, afflicted human beings, broken and hurtful social relations, even those who have died—up into the intentions and power of the one he called Father, for the Father to bring to light a deeper truth of an unimaginable abundance. In the passion, Jesus consummates this holding of all things out towards the Father; he makes an offering even of the world's violent misjudgement and mistreatment of all that he is and all that he bears within himself, waiting for whatever the Father would make of these things. In eternity, the Father knows and rejoices in the truth of God and of all things in the eternal begetting of the Word, and this same act of divine knowing and rejoicing is expressed in our world as the Father's resurrection of Christ, in which the Father acknowledges, vindicates, and rejoices in the truth of the Word incarnate and of all things in him, bringing this living truth to light, liberated from the world's power to oppress, misuse, or harm it; and so bringing to birth the new creation.

In Christianity, the redemption of creaturely truth in Christ draws the contemplative calling into its likeness. The contemplative considers the beings of this world and receives them in thought, attending with care to whatever hurt or distortion they may have suffered, and offering them into the light of God's perfect knowing and loving of their eternal truth, prays that through Christ's dying and rising they may find reconciliation and recreation through this contemplative communion with their life in God.

My argument in this section, then, has been that another important reason for mystical theology's central role in Christianity derives from the way it coheres with and advances the community's participation in the liberating work of Christ; for it is a key element in the community's struggle to recognize and serve the deep mystical truth of the new creation in Christ. In assisting the Christian community to prepare for, nurture,

and reflect upon the contemplative awareness of God's recreative truth for every creature, mystical theology clarifies and deepens the understanding of the community's solidarity with the reconciling work of Christ.

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CHAPTER 3

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

EDWARD HOWELLS

WHAT is the role of human experience in mystical theology? William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), probably the most influential modern account of mystical experience, puts the view that mysticism is defined by the special characteristics of the experience, as possessing four 'marks': ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (James 1902: 379–82). In the longer history of mystical theology with which we are concerned here, these marks have occasionally been given prominence, but they fail to describe either the phenomena or the ideas of mystical theology adequately. From a theological perspective, the problem with James's account is that all kinds of experience can be said to be of God. The notion of 'God' entails a creator who is both universally present and present everywhere equally, so that experience does not easily divide into different kinds where God is more or less present. To tell one experience of God from another—to say which are 'mystical' and which are not—requires not just certain 'marks' of experience but an understanding of how God relates to the world in the first place, and further distinctions concerning the ways that God might be present in human experience. In other words, some attention to theology is needed before or at least alongside an account of the experience itself. For mystical theology, it is vital that experience is kept centrally in view, but the category of experience cannot do all the work on its own. For instance, when James says that one of the marks of mysticism is that the experience has an 'ineffable' quality, we need to know more: is this ineffability of the kind encountered in the world, when objects of experience are hard to express, or is it of the very different kind that applies to a creator who is not one of the objects in the world but prior to creation as a whole? Theology is needed for this task.

One of the difficulties in approaching experience of any kind, however, which affects all theological reflection, is that experience usually happens at some remove from the reflective and critical mode in which we do theology. Of course, thinking theologically

is as much a matter of human experience as any other experience, and there is no firm division between the different areas of our experience—it is possible to be critical and experiential at the same time, for instance—but there is, nevertheless, a strong element to experience that ‘just happens,’ and happens regardless of how well or whether we think about it. We generally introduce theology after the event, in a distinct mode of reflection. We also know from common observation that, without any theological preparation or forethought, experiences happen which have great consequence for people’s lives. As a result of a certain experience, a person may start thinking about God who had not thought about God before. The experience, for them at least, is the cause of theological reflection, and not the other way round. But the argument here is rather different: it is not denied that experience has a defining impact, only that *as experience* it does not in fact precede theology. Theology is already present, even for the person who has not thought about God before, in the possibility that, among the available explanations, this might be an experience of God. A person identifies an experience with God not just because of the immediately presenting ‘marks,’ but for a wider set of reasons having to do with their previous experience, understanding, background, and so on. Theology enters as part of this context, even if it only arises explicitly for an individual at a certain point in life. We need theology to make sense of mystical experience.

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out at the outset that James’s approach also has a significant strength. He recognized that it is a failing of both theology and philosophy in modernity to think that ultimate questions of truth and meaning can be answered before attending to the concrete realities of experience. He was reacting against Enlightenment and scientific views in which the particularity of experience was regarded as thoroughly subordinate and secondary to universal laws. An emphasis on the many varieties of experience seeks to put right this imbalance. For the same reason, mystical theology seeks to return experience to the centre of theology. The role of experience in mystical theology is important, for instance, in its capacity to disrupt settled assumptions. If God is to be adequately treated, it is vital that experience is not domesticated and fitted into a smooth system of thought. To perform this task, experience is cultivated by mystical theology which, paradoxically, challenges the expectations of theology. An example is to be found in John of the Cross’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night* (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1979: 65–389). The ‘dark night’ is, at least in part, an experience of psychological suffering, which is intensified by the mystical journey. It is intensified by the desire to find God within it: the desire for divine help makes the felt absence of God all the more painful. Experience is used to deconstruct settled views of religious satisfaction in relation to God. But the final purpose is constructive, which is to enlarge human experience beyond its current dimensions—using the experience of suffering as a way to expand the range of human experience—so that it more fully embraces God’s universal presence in creation, with the goal of attaining a contemplative view of reality as a whole. John actively seeks out the most challenging features of human experience as a provocation which enables this mystical growth.

Mystical theology seeks to expand human experience into the dimensions of the divine life. Theological teaching or doctrine is used to provoke human experience to

something greater. Doctrine is understood less as an independent set of propositions than as a means to open out experience according to the goals of faith. The notion of 'God', for instance, is not approached as a fixed goal for the human journey but as an expanding horizon that elicits growth, always extending experience beyond its current form; and the historical revelation of Jesus Christ is used to situate all experience at the heart of the Godhead, so that it can be expanded into Jesus' experience as the divine Son. Mystical theologians do not sit in judgement on experience, pointing out its shortcomings and claiming higher ground, but rather seek to harness it in its entirety for growth into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

CRITICISMS OF WILLIAM JAMES'S APPROACH

William James's contribution has shaped the discussion of mysticism and mystical theology in the past century to the extent that it is worth beginning by considering the most significant philosophical and theological reactions to his notion of mystical experience, which will also help to set out key questions in the debate about experience.

Steven Katz, in an early essay on mysticism and philosophy, takes aim at James's assumption that there is a core of 'pure' experience in mysticism, which is prior to interpretation (Katz 1978). He identifies this trajectory in some of the most prominent twentieth-century studies of mysticism, by Evelyn Underhill, Rudolph Otto, W. T. Stace, and R. C. Zaehner. Against this defining assumption, Katz aims to show that all experience is interpreted, including mystical experience. It is unreasonable, he suggests, to say that mysticism is a unique kind of experience where we can separate experience from interpretation. Experience is freighted with interpretation as soon as it is experienced. Theoretically, it is possible to say that there must be some point in experience prior to interpretation, for instance in sensory perception when the senses are first stimulated by their object, but we know nothing of our experience at this point; it only becomes experience when it enters consciousness, which requires some degree of interpretation. Of course, there are greater and lesser degrees of interpretation, but interpretation is always involved as soon as we advert to our experience. The point is well taken: we are not dealing with a unique kind of experience where interpretation is no longer needed, but with something that is as multilayered and complex as any experience to which we attach significance. It suits James to assert that there is uninterpreted, 'pure' experience, as the foundation for his theory of religion, but he offers little to support his view.

Katz diminishes the force of his argument, however, by adding that, because mystical experiences always involve interpretation, they are *determined* by their religious context. They simply reproduce the presuppositions of the religious position. They cannot be related to universal truth or be compared across religions and cultures. They possess no capacity to persuade outside their own religious community. Katz's difficulty at this

point is that he has proposed an inaccessibility of truth which is as problematic as James's suggestion about pure experience: in both cases, though from opposite poles of the debate, religious experience is separated from the broader realm of human meaning. He need not go to this extreme. It can reasonably be held that mystical experience, like all other experience, requires interpretation according to context, while also asserting that, as with other truth claims, it is not wholly determined by the context but retains the ability, within its particular perspective, of pointing towards universal truth, and thus can be compared between one tradition and another (Howells 2001). On this view, which is the view taken in this chapter, the experience involved in mystical theology can be regarded as both a cultural artefact, on the one hand, requiring attention to historical, linguistic, and intellectual context for its interpretation, and equally, on the other hand, as related to a universal truth that extends beyond the cultural confines of a single tradition.

Second, Nicholas Lash, in his *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (1988), offers a number of objections to James's approach, at the centre of which is his theological criticism that James treats God as just one of the possible objects of human experience, in competition with other objects. For theology, God as creator is universally present, which entails, as I have indicated, that distinctions as to whether or how God is experienced cannot be made on the basis of experience alone. The point is essential to the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and sanctification (Lash 1988: 59–60). Lash is particularly riled by the idea that experience of God could be restricted to the kind of extraordinary experience preferred by James. For James, the experience is found in solitude, in what he calls 'extreme cases' which have a quality met 'nowhere else', where there is a unique kind of 'feeling', felt in a distinct 'portion of our nature' (James 1902: 26–52). If solitary experience divorced from culture is really what we are looking for, Lash replies, 'the best way to prepare someone for the experience of God would be to abandon them, at birth, in some untracked waste' (Lash 1988: 58). For Lash, theology introduces a democratic imperative of God's availability in all places, including ordinary experience, over which James runs roughshod with elitist notions of religious experience as extraordinary and extreme. For our purposes, the key point in Lash's argument is that, in theological terms which match Katz's philosophical objections, interpretation is central to the experience of God. The role of theology is to provide language, understanding, and ritual to mediate this experience where otherwise God would be inaccessible. Lash resists taking this point to Katz's extreme of complete relativism in matters of religion, however, allowing that the notion of experience of God has universal currency while also requiring mediation by culture and history.

Third, Denys Turner, in his *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (1995), criticizes James from the direction of negative theology. In Dionysius (fl. c.500 CE) and his followers, negative theology and mystical theology are closely identified. The problem for negative theology is not so much the 'what' of experience of God as the 'how': how is it possible to speak of 'experience' of God when God is wholly unlike other objects of human experience, not being one of the things in creation? Turner points to a vital distinction made in negative theology, between saying that God is experienced as

absent or ineffable, on the one hand, and the much stronger claim that human experience as a whole is called into question or 'negated' by the divine ineffability, on the other hand. The first is an experiential ineffability, an 'experience of' ineffability, while the second is a theological ineffability in which experience is negated as a whole, which Turner calls an 'absence of experience' (Turner 1995: 264). Negative theology insists that experience of God is marked by this absence, in which there is a break in our experience in relation to God, rather than offering a positive grasp on what we are experiencing. He supports the claim with examples from Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross, where the failure of experience of God is juxtaposed, dialectically, with the theological claim that humanity is united to God prior to experience, in a union received by grace. We experience this duality negatively, in terms of a strong contrast between a prior, deep understanding of union with God and the experience of being unable to grasp God. Turner sees this as a thorough rejection of the 'experientialism' proposed by William James, which he also finds in much of the contemporary debate about mysticism (Turner 1995: 259).

Rather like Katz, Turner provides a crucial insight but he takes his criticism of experience too far, effectively cutting experience of God off from the broader human capacity for truth and meaning. In theological terms, he fails to account for the equally important tenet in Christian theology, alongside God's transcendence, of God's immanence in Jesus Christ, who experienced God positively in his humanity and not just negatively. Jesus exhibited both the negative moment of ineffability in his human experience of God—for instance in his silence in the Passion and in his cry of dereliction from the cross—and an anthropology of personal unity with the Father, where God can be positively felt and known. The same experience is promised to the followers of Christ, who 'share in' the divine Son's relationship with the Father. Consequently, mystics emphasize both the negative moment and the positive, together, without any sense of contradiction. Some dwell on one more than the other, but the two moments belong together. In doctrine, we find the combination expressed in the dual natures of Christ, as a simultaneous unity with and distinction from the divine, while in mystical theology, the same logic is carried into experience. The linguistic metaphors most distinctive of mystical theology—such as ecstasy, interiority, depth, spiritual marriage, and union—deliberately perform this dual task, at once suggesting both intimate/positive unity with God and a negative distinction from God, of complete inexpressibility. Thus, Dionysian negativity and experiential affirmation are not opposites but complementary facets of the treatment of experience in mystical theology. The value of Turner's analysis, nevertheless, is in his insistence that the moment of negativity is placed at the centre of this notion of experience. Experience must be said to be subverted as a whole relation to God, while finding a way to say that, at the same time, there is a real human experience of growth in relation to God. What this means remains a conundrum. But for the mystics, it is a conundrum to be welcomed and worked at, because it is central to the life of faith and human flourishing.

The three mystical theologians on whom I focus in this chapter, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, and Teresa of Avila, are chosen because they provide an especially close analysis

of this process of mystical growth through ongoing experience of God. They show how the initially confusing challenge presented by experience of God can be harnessed for the greater transformation of the whole person.

AUGUSTINE (354–430)

Augustine's treatment of mystical experience has most often been pursued in relation to two texts: the *Confessions*, especially the vision at Ostia (book 9, chapter 10), and *On the Trinity*, which grounds the experience in the nature of the human person as made in the triune image of God (especially books 8–15). The scholarly discussion of these texts is complicated by two considerations: whether Augustine changed his view between the *Confessions* and the completion of *On the Trinity* twenty or more years later; and whether he qualifies as a mystical theologian. On the first point, the Ostia vision is certainly unusual in relation to Augustine's entire output, with its emphasis on an extraordinary experience of the 'touch' of God's direct presence, which is seldom repeated in later works. It comes early in his transition to a more integrated understanding of the elements of Platonic introspection in his Christian theology and ecclesiology. But his broader emphasis on contemplation, understood as the goal of the Christian life and as already possible to some degree in our present experience, remains unchanged (Ayres 2010; Harrison 2006). The second point arises from the fact that Augustine makes little use of the word 'mystical'. From this point of view, there is indeed an element of hindsight in calling Augustine a mystic, but so foundational is he for the subsequent tradition of Western mystical theology—often being called the Father of Western Christian mysticism—that it would be hard to understand either the term 'mystical' or the other elements of this tradition without him (McGinn 1991: 230–1). This tradition cannot be restricted to the use of the term 'mystical' on its own but possesses a collection of terms, themes, and characteristics which together constitute the lexical field of mystical theology (McGinn 1998).

The Puzzle: the Ostia Vision

Augustine's vision at Ostia announces an experience of God 'without mediation' from creatures, which sets up the central challenge for experience, concerning what this experience can be, in the light of the divine transcendence. The vision occurs at the point in the story of the *Confessions* where he is on his way home from Italy to North Africa with his mother Monica, after his conversion to Christianity. He says,

She and I were standing leaning out of the window overlooking a garden. It was at the house where we were staying at Ostia on the Tiber... Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond

all corporeal objects and the heaven itself...to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food....And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart....If all language and every sign and everything transitory is silent...then he [God] alone would speak not through them [language and signs] but through himself. We would hear his word, not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of a symbolic utterance. Him who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation. That is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things. If only it could last.

(Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.23–4; Chadwick 1991: 171–2)

What is this experience? God's voice is heard without the mediation of creatures, which suggests that the experience possesses an extreme ineffability, with nothing in creation to articulate it. Augustine presents the point more as a puzzle than as an answer to the question of experience.

Augustine's *On the Trinity*

In *On the Trinity*, Augustine takes a rather different approach, seeking to give this puzzle a basis in the creation of every human soul according to the 'image of God', from which something more constructive about the experience can be said. Referring to 1 Corinthians 13: 12, that we see God now 'in a mirror and in an enigma [or puzzle]', but later, in heaven, 'face to face', Augustine likens the human mind, made according to the image of God, to a 'mirror' where God is found in the form of a puzzle, at once showing the mind's incapacity in relation to God and pointing towards God as its contemplative goal (Augustine, *Trinity* 15.13, 44; Hill 1991: 405, 429). God will not be seen clearly until the end of the journey, in heaven, but we have this mirror and puzzle in our inner capacity for God, on which we can reflect.

Ayres understands the argument of *On the Trinity* as a sustained effort to inculcate what he calls a 'Christological epistemology' in the reader, to attain a kind of knowing possessed only 'in' the two-natured Christ (Ayres 2010: 142). The puzzle of our creation in the image of God is answered by our inclusion, by grace, in Christ's being. The answer is reached through a lifelong transformation of the subject into Christ's union of human and divine natures, offering the possibility of a direct experience of God like that of Christ, as the divine Son in relation to the Father. Without this transformation, however, God presents an impossible challenge to human experience, because our human capacity is inadequate in relation to God—it must be healed and enlarged into the likeness of Christ's humanity, to attain the experience. This does not answer the question of experience, but it provides the key to the puzzle: we are gradually coming to experience God on the model of the two-natured Christ, in a movement paralleled by the sending of the Son to us in the incarnation.

The experience of God is not simply mediated to us through the humanity of Christ, and could not be, given that God is not one of the objects in creation, but it can be possessed in the same manner as Christ, from 'within' his human-divine anthropology. In the context of a discussion of how the Son is sent by the Father without rendering him subordinate, Augustine asks how we *know* that the Son sent in the incarnation is God and not less than God.

So the Son of God is sent by him whose Word he is. . . . And he is precisely sent to anyone when he is known and perceived by him, as far as he can be perceived and known according to the capacity of a rational soul. . . . [that is,] either in the fact that the Word made flesh showed himself to this world. . . . or . . . in the fact that he is perceived in time by somebody's mind. (Augustine, *Trinity* 4.28; Hill 1991: 173)

For the Father to send the Son to us in the incarnation implies, for Augustine, that we have the capacity to recognize him really as God, knowable by an individual mind in principle, in time. Our minds have the capacity to know divinity, not just humanity. We know both the divinity and the humanity, together, without diluting divinity in favour of a subordinate, merely human messenger. Christological reflection indicates that we receive not just a mediated experience of God through Christ's humanity, but an experience 'without mediation', as Augustine put it at Ostia, in that it is *also* of God as divine. Like the relationship between the divine Son and the Father, the experience is not only mediated through the external features of creation, but comes directly through the inner person of Christ. In turning to the subject in the second half of the work (books 8–15), Augustine seeks to investigate our experience of this Christological epistemology. He proceeds to speculate on the kind of experience of the presence of God that we might expect. It would be presumptuous to anticipate the actual experience of God, which is a matter of sheer grace, but we can ponder what it might be like, on the basis of our creation in the image of God, informed by scripture, doctrine, and the revelation of Christ. Three characteristics of the experience in particular are picked out by Augustine.

First, the experience will be of a spiritual kind as opposed to a bodily one. By 'bodily' Augustine means the kind of experience in which we distance ourselves from what we are experiencing, in order to know it, as we do with the physical objects in the world. To know a physical object you must form a concept of it in the mind which is separate from yourself as the subject. The spiritual kind of experience, however, works not from a bodily distinction between subject and object, but from an inward participation or sharing in that which it experiences. In the case of the spiritual reality of the good, for instance, 'You can perceive good itself by participating in [that by] which these other things are good—and you understand it together with them when you hear a good this or that' (Augustine, *Trinity* 8.5; Hill 1991: 244–5). You experience the good not by separating it from yourself but by observing how you share in it, along with the other things which are good. In this form of experience, the mind shows a capacity for knowledge by participation.

Second, to experience in this way reveals a deeper capacity in the subject, which is the capacity to differentiate the self internally, so that one can observe a distinction between

the subject and what is experienced, in the mode of participation. Augustine takes as an example of this kind of knowing the way that we know our own presence to ourselves, in reflecting on the command of the Delphic Oracle, 'Know thyself':

The mind you see is not told *Know thyself* in the same way as it might be told 'Know the cherubim and seraphim'; of them, as absent beings, we believe what they are declared to be, that they are certain heavenly powers. Nor is it like being told 'Know the will of that man,' which is not available in any way to our sense perceptions, nor even to our intelligence unless certain bodily signs of it are given, and this in such a way that we must rather believe than be intellectually aware of what it is. Nor is it like a man being told 'Look at your face,' which he can only do in a mirror; even our own face is absent from our sight, because it is not in a place our sight can be directed at. But when the mind is told *Know thyself*, it knows itself the very moment it understands what 'thyself' is, and for no other reason than that it is present to itself.

(Augustine, *Trinity* 10.12; Hill 1991: 295)

To 'know thyself' is contrasted with other kinds of knowing in which there is some mediating distance between the subject and the object. By an internal differentiation of the mind from within, the subject is able to know itself even though it is utterly immediate to itself, from within its own being. We can now see where Augustine is heading. There is an echo of the 'touch' of God's presence at Ostia, where God is experienced as simply present, without mediation. The mind has a spiritual capacity which makes it able to know an object to which it is immediately joined: it can differentiate this unity from within. It exercises this kind of knowing when it knows such things as the good or its own self-presence, and it is the same capacity, Augustine suggests, that will be used in experience of God. Here, God will be experienced not as a separate body, but as one in whom the mind participates in unmediated contact. The mind brings its human capacity for self-differentiation to bear on this relationship of unity with God. Its human mediating capacity is then constituted wholly 'within' the unmediated relationship that it has with God, allowing it to experience what is properly God's mode of being, as divine, while doing so at the human level of the mind's self-differentiation. The mind mediates the unmediated relationship with God! Augustine finds the roots of the contemplative capacity here, in this natural capacity for self-differentiation within the subject.

Third, most distinctive of this kind of experience is its character as love. 'The only thing we really have to see is what true love is,' Augustine announces (Augustine, *Trinity* 8.10; Hill 1991: 251). Love provides the true logic of self-differentiation in relation to God, because our experience is in response to the love given by God in the incarnation. In love, one can be aware of the other who is loved and oneself at the same time, seeing both their unity and their differentiation together. Love also makes this awareness personal. It is not just a matter of participation in a greater reality, but of personal relationship with another who loves and is loved. Augustine introduces the mind's likeness to the Trinity at this point, as a set of personal relations made known to us in the love of the Son and the Holy Spirit (Augustine, *Trinity* 8.14; Hill 1991: 255).

Our capacity for self-differentiation is employed at the level of this personal love with God. To 'know love' in this context is to experience God (Augustine, *Trinity* 8.12; Hill 1991: 253–4).

The life of faith involves the growth of this capacity for experience of God from its merely natural form to its graced form as contemplative awareness of the mind's sharing in the divine life. The picture now looks very different from the impression given by the Ostia vision alone. Augustine sees the sudden, extraordinary, and destabilizing experience of Ostia as significant only in relation to a longer process of growth in the image of God. The 'mirror' of the soul reflects the love of God in the incarnation and differentiates God's presence within this relationship of love. The 'puzzle' remains, for this experience is always incomplete and partial, this side of heaven; but God is truly possessed as God, by participation in God's love, which can be humanly known. Each experience of this love is both a fulfilment and a lack, being incomplete, so that the goal cannot be identified with any one particular experience. But as the whole experiencing apparatus grows gradually, in increasing likeness to Christ, experience of God can be positively grasped.

For Augustine, a key part of the reason why we cannot attain this vision all at once is the problem of sin, on which he dwells at some length. The 'apostasy of pride', which is the root of sin, leads the mind to seek power over what it knows, and so to lose touch with the sheer gift that is the love of God (Augustine, *Trinity* 12.14; Hill 1991: 330). In the incarnation, God chooses to come in the form of human weakness and humility, in order to confute our pride and break through it, by showing its opposite (Augustine, *Trinity* 4.1–2, 13.22–3; Hill 1991: 152–3, 361–2). Thus, in looking at God in the form of a servant, Christ's humanity takes us 'straight towards' God, from the divisions caused by pride to the personal intimacy of his divine life (Augustine, *Trinity* 13.24; Hill 1991: 363; Ayres 2010: 158). The point to note is that experience of God depends on healing and renewal of the whole person, not least in the moral sphere, in the movement from pride to love, subjection to freedom, and spiritual blindness to vision. In seeking the experience of God, we are not looking merely for new experiences, but to attain wisdom, which requires transformation at the level of the subject's moral and intellectual grasp on experience as a whole.

Augustine's last word on experience of God in *On the Trinity* is negative. He first reiterates that, as made in the image of God, a positive 'likeness' can be affirmed as gradually attained, between the human experiencing capacity and the life of the Trinity, which can be found 'in yourself' (Augustine, *Trinity* 15.39, 50; Hill 1991: 426, 435). As a mirror, the image points towards that of which it is the image, specifically in its capacity for self-differentiation within the relationship of love (Augustine, *Trinity* 14.15; Hill 1991: 383), as we have seen. But he then adds that the experience of God itself remains inexpressible, because we are speaking about the human capacity to receive this experience rather than of God's actual presence. Although we have made some headway, we still do not know what this experience is until it is received, and on this note Augustine ends the work 'with a prayer in preference to an argument' (Augustine, *Trinity* 15.50; Hill 1991: 435).

MEISTER ECKHART (C.1260–C.1328): THE PRIORITY OF NEGATION

By the time of Eckhart, the early Dominican preacher and master of the early fourteenth century, it is a theological commonplace that, following Augustine, the mind can be said to 'resemble' the Trinity in its higher powers of memory, intellect, and will (Eckhart, Sermon 83; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 206). But how it resembles God takes on a much more negative complexion in Eckhart than in Augustine. The similarity is far surpassed by the dissimilarity: God is more unlike than like the human soul. Eckhart applies a strong negativity to the notion of experience of God, especially on the grounds of the successive quality of human experience in time:

Renewal happens to all created beings under God; but no renewal comes to God, but evermore only eternity. What is eternity? Pay heed! It is the property of eternity that in it being and youth are one, because eternity would not be eternity if it could be renewed.... [So for the soul] when it is an image of God and as nameless as God, then no renewal happens to it but only eternity, which is God.

(Eckhart, Sermon 83; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 206)

For Eckhart, the fact of the soul's 'renewal' in relation to God, in terms of the image, tells us nothing about the experience, for there is no likeness with God in terms of renewal. Nevertheless, some experience is implied in Eckhart's assertion that eternity 'happens to' the soul.

Having excluded human process, there seems little possibility of saying anything about the human experience of God. However, Loris Sturlese points out that Eckhart finds the similarity between the human 'image' and God elsewhere. Indeed, in this respect, he speaks of it as an identity, not merely a resemblance. The formal emanation of divinity into humanity in creation, as formal, is without recourse to efficient and final causality (Sturlese 1993: 27). For Eckhart this signifies that humanity shares in the divine outflow in creation at a level that is without succession. The mind can understand this, because it shares its intellectual nature with God formally (McGinn 2005: 149–50). On this limited basis, therefore, there is some justification for talking of experience of God, because the intellect can receive and know God as non-successive. But it is still the case that we cannot speak of it, because the terms that we use for experience involve or imply succession in time, so this fact is of little immediate help. This is Eckhart's version of the puzzle: the resemblance between God and humanity is close enough to assert an identity, at the level of intellect, but experience must be denied because this identity occurs at a point anterior to temporal succession and thus to what we call experience as a whole.

Following the negative theology of Dionysius, however, Eckhart finds a way to keep both sides of this paradox in play, using dialectical language, which he regards as fruitful for human understanding. We both assert the pre-linguistic unity that we have with

God and deny it, using the denials at least to point to the unity that we have with God prior to experience and language.

[How should I perceive God?] You should perceive him without images, without a medium, without comparisons. But if I am to perceive God so, without a medium, then I must become him, and he must become me. I say more: God must become me, and I must become God, so completely one that this 'he' and this 'I' become and are one 'is,' and, in this is-ness, eternally perform one work. . . . If you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image—all this must go! 'Then how should I love him?' You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright 'One,' separated from all duality. (Eckhart, Sermon 83; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 208)

Eckhart proposes an anthropology to support this dialectical approach. The model of our creation in the image of God, Jesus Christ, shows that the image is most fully possessed when—paradoxically again—it is given up and denied, in sheer inner poverty. The denials of negative theology are given a deep basis in the incarnation, by which God comes to us. Eckhart situates this negative moment of inner poverty at the heart of the Trinity, as its defining characteristic:

For love, the Holy Spirit, springs and flows from the Son, and the Son loves the Father for the Father's sake, and loves the Father in himself, and loves himself in the Father. And therefore indeed our Lord says that 'the poor in spirit are blessed' (Mt. 5:13), that is, those who have nothing of their own and of human spirit, and who come naked to God.

(Eckhart, *The Book of 'Benedictus': The Book of Divine Consolation 2*;
Colledge and McGinn 1981: 227–8)

The Son loves the Father 'for the Father's sake' and not for his own sake, and in this complete mutual self-gift they are 'in' each other, in unity. The element of dispossession or poverty in love is the key to its mutual possession. In Christ's poverty, there is the point of access to divinity and thus to our unity with God. When we adopt the same poverty, by coming 'naked to God,' we possess the divine life out of the same poverty that Christ has, which is also the divine source within us, or 'ground' as Eckhart calls it elsewhere (e.g. Eckhart, Sermons 5b, 48; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 183, 198). Negative theology is no longer a matter of linguistic denials alone but of total self-dispossession, which by sheer tension with God's otherness, allows God to be 'perceived' as the source. The paradox makes sense because it is based on a deeper self-dispossession of the subject in relation to God, which is affirmed as the love of Jesus and the unity of the Trinity.

Though our creation in the image of God is negatively conceived by Eckhart, requiring total self-dispossession, in contrast to Augustine's more positive treatment, it is still experiential, even if no particular experience can be identified. It is an imitation of Christ in experience. Turner is right that it can be described as an 'absence of experience,' because it is a dispossession of the whole person in loving relation to God, rather than

the experience of anything in particular (Turner 1995: 259). But Eckhart, like Augustine, is using this fact as a means to something greater, namely the full possession of God in inner poverty, rather than giving value to negation itself. It is something fully experienced, though found through a continuous renunciation of experience of this or that. It is the experience of Jesus Christ, as fully human. Eckhart seeks a change of perspective on our experience as a whole, in which the subject looks further back, to the source, beyond the immediate phenomena of experience, but something does truly 'happen': understanding moves to a level at which the formal, non-successive emanation of God in the human intellect is perceived by the mind.

Eckhart's great concern is that experience, even the most wonderful experience of God, always runs the risk of turning into a possession which then counteracts the benefits of the experience, because the experience then stands in for God, who is in fact beyond it. Really to possess God entails denying experiences, so that God can be found more deeply within and beyond the experience, in the unmediated 'ground' of inner poverty. Further, to seek this ground has the advantage that it is available everywhere—as much 'by the fireside or in the stable,' Eckhart says, as in 'inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches' (Eckhart, Sermon 5b; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 183–4). Augustine's move from the extraordinary experience of Ostia to the image of God makes the experience of God without mediation something of which all people are capable, in their natural experiencing capacity; and Eckhart, for all his negativity, democratizes this experience further, by pointing to its roots in an inner poverty or 'nothingness' that is accessible everywhere, because requiring nothing other than sheer self-gift in relation to God, which is the source or ground of every soul, at any moment and in any place.

Yet there is further to go in this democratization of mystical experience. Both Augustine and Eckhart regard the experience as an inward one, discovered primarily in contrast with experience of the outward phenomena of the world (though capable of being found everywhere 'within' it). In my third example, I turn to the possibility articulated by Teresa of Avila, that this experience might be not just an inward one, conceived in reaction to the outward phenomena of the world, but one joined to the life of the body in the world, bringing the experience fully into the ordinary realm.

TERESA OF AVILA (1515–1582): THE INTEGRATION OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE WITH EVERYDAY LIFE

To understand Teresa of Avila's approach to experience, it is necessary to look back briefly to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (written 1135–53), which gave mystical theology, in the late medieval period, a new emphasis on psychological feeling. Bernard introduces what he calls the 'book of experience,' which puts the

reader's affective response at the centre of the inward journey of the soul, as image of God, into the life of the Trinity (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, I.3.1; Walsh 1971: 221). He finds this affective experience especially in the Song of Songs (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, I.1.11; Walsh 1971: 214–15). Bernard calls the experience a 'book' to indicate its close connection to the task of exegesis, and this distances his view from the kind of Jamesian experience that can be defined in terms of experience alone: it is experience acquired, as for Augustine and Eckhart, through participation in the larger experience of God in the incarnation. Yet there is a new psychological focus, especially concerning the experience of the goal of 'union with God' (McGinn 1994: 212).

There are many influences on Teresa of Avila other than Bernard of Clairvaux, but a similar emphasis on experience of God as affectively felt is to be found in her mystical theology. She introduces her discussion of mystical theology in these terms, in her *Life*:

It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in his presence, or even while reading that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt that he was within me or I totally immersed in him....I believe they call it 'mystical theology.' The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost. For, as I say, the intellect does not work, but it is as though amazed by all it understands because God desires that it understand, with regard to the things His Majesty represents to it, that it understands nothing.

(Teresa of Avila, *Life* 10.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 105)

'Mystical theology' is a certain 'feeling of the presence of God' in which the soul is 'suspended' in an ecstatic state of being 'outside itself'. The Augustinian image of God is recalled in her mention of memory, intellect, and will, but unlike Augustine, she connects these faculties to the psychological detail of how the experience feels. As she goes on to say, 'What I'm attempting to explain is what the soul feels when it is in this divine union' (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 18.3; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 158).

Significantly, this experience of union was not just of the mind, for Teresa, but included the body too. Teresa was part of a burgeoning of especially women's mystical writings between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries which brought a new emphasis on bodily phenomena. Paradoxically, however, she regarded the state of union, at first, as being marked by the feeling of being cut off from the body, in a state of paralysis. It was powerfully felt in the body but in negative terms, as paralysis. In her *Life*, she sees this sensation as distinctly revealing the highest level of mystical prayer (the 'fourth water'):

In the fourth water the soul isn't in possession of its senses[;]...no power remains in the body, nor does the soul have any power to communicate its joy....All the external energy is lost, and that of the soul increased so that it might better enjoy this joy....All my longing then is to die...I am oblivious of everything in that

anxious longing to see God; that desert and solitude seem to the soul better than all the companionship of the world.

(Teresa of Avila, *Life* 18.1, 12–13, 20.13; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 161–2, 178)

Teresa also speaks of the ‘deep affliction’ that these experiences caused her, when they were made public (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 29.14; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 252–3). She wanted to keep them private, but because of their bodily effects she could not hide them. She lived in fear of being accused of devil deception, knowing that they would mark her out as someone courting public attention as a visionary. This led her to seek support from the more friendly spiritual authorities in Avila, to try to avoid censure (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 23.4–5, 12; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 201–2, 205; Bilinkoff 1989: 110–51).

This is Teresa’s version of the puzzle: the experience of God feels in its bodily aspect as a flight from world, initially at least—nothing less than a ‘longing to die’—but at the same time it engages her with the world, in an apparently contradictory move to seek human contact. Her anxious seeking after approval from the authorities in Avila had the effect, unwitting at the time, of moving her out of the isolation that she took to be central to her experience of union, giving her a new set of contacts with the people and wider movements of reform. Through them, she gradually gathered support enough to found the first of her reformed monasteries. Looking back, she saw a direct connection between her extraordinary experiences and the reform of her Order: she regarded the reform as following from her new experiences in prayer (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 32.1–12; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 276–81). But it was not a straightforward development. It involved a painful reorientation of her thinking and activity, from the direction in which she thought she had been going, which was to seek escape from the world, to something new, in her work of reengagement with the world in her reforming activity. The puzzle provoked her to this enlarged understanding of her experience of God in relation to the world.

Out of body experiences, paradoxically, moved her back to the body and to society. Over time, she modified her view of union, to reflect this inclusion of the body. Her final view, which she introduced about fifteen years later in the Fourth Dwelling Places of the *Interior Castle* (for the interim developments, see Howells 2002: 70–118), is notably different:

The water [of prayer] comes from its own source which is God...in the very interior part of ourselves.... The delight fills everything; this water overflows through all the dwelling places and faculties until reaching the body.... What I think is helpful for explaining this matter is the idea of expansion. It seems that since the heavenly water begins to rise from this spring I’m mentioning that is deep within us, it swells and expands our whole interior being[;]... the warmth and the fragrant fumes spread through the entire soul and even often enough, as I have said, the body shares in them.

(Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 4.2.4, 6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 324–5)

The 'idea of expansion', which Teresa takes from the Psalm text, 'you have expanded my heart' (Ps. 119: 137) represents a breakthrough, in that it provides a mechanism to join her interior experience to the rest of her soul and body. The experience remains first of all interior, in that it originates in the 'very interior part of ourselves' and 'deep within us', which is the level of the divine source. This defines the experience as distinctively mystical, for Teresa, in tune with the tradition from Augustine; and it has the 'anterior' character of Eckhart, being regarded as prior to her conscious experience as a whole. But she also seeks to show how it moves outward, to include the rest of the soul and the body. The 'idea of expansion' is to explain how the inner part of the soul, deeply engaged with God in unmediated union, can also include the engagement of the outer regions of her soul and body, in an 'overflow' of the divine source to the soul and body. Teresa introduces the 'centre of the soul' at this point in the text, which is a new term for her, signifying this notion of *integration* between the interior and exterior parts of the soul, around a single interior point of union (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 4.2.5; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 324; Howells 2002: 114–18).

In other words, Teresa comes to regard the extraordinary element of bodily paralysis in her experience of God as a transitional phase whose purpose is for 'expanding' the soul, so that the experience of union includes the body and human action. This points to the final Dwelling Places of the *Interior Castle*, where the soul is so transformed that 'Mary and Martha', who represent the contemplative and active lives, as well as the interior and exterior parts of the soul, 'join together'. The divine activity in the centre of the soul 'shoots arrows' outwards, energizing the whole soul in exterior action (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 7.2.6, 4.10–12; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 435, 447–8). Significantly, Teresa adds that at this point there is no need for raptures, that is, for ecstatic states in which there is an experience of 'suspension' and paralysis of the body, because the soul is now more deeply united with the divine source, at its 'centre' (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 7.1.5–6, 2.5, 3.6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 430, 434, 439).

Like Augustine, Teresa sees the experience of God without mediation as possible through the transformation of the soul as image of God; and as for Eckhart, this centre, like the 'ground', reveals a unity with God which is prior to experience as a whole. Unlike both of them, however, she rejoins this inner centre to the outer parts of the soul and the body, so that experience of God even in its most mystical, unmediated character, becomes bodily and ordinary, in concrete works of service of the crucified in the world (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 7.3.4–6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 439). As recent study of the gender aspects of Teresa's position has shown, Teresa cannot be understood apart from this enlarged engagement with the physical and social world (Weber 1990; Ahlgren 1996; Williams 1991). Her femininity makes her unable, in sixteenth-century Spain, to hide her mystical theology: her interior life must be subject to public scrutiny, for approval. The puzzle of mystical experience finds a new expression in this feminine space, requiring a recognizable expression in the public and social realm. While the distinction between the interior and exterior is maintained by Teresa and is essential to her understanding of mystical theology, she rejoins interior life with exterior action in a way

that removes the preference for the inner over the outer. Mystical experience, though arising from the unmediated, interior centre of unity with God, includes the whole world. The experience is now also of the world, in Christ-like works drawn from the inner unity with Christ, without division.

THE SPIRITUAL SENSES TRADITION

Having arrived at Teresa's integration of the body in mystical union, it is worth returning to the question of the senses. The use of the bodily senses is rejected in Teresa's early view of mystical union, but reintegrated in her later view. Augustine is more positive than Eckhart about the role of the image of God, as the human capacity for experience which includes inner psychological sensation, as we have seen, but both turn away from the bodily senses. Thus, the tradition of the 'spiritual senses', which brings together reflection on the role of the senses in relation to God through the history of Christianity, serves as a kind of reference point alongside the mystical tradition, against which the treatment of experience here can be compared and reviewed.

Origen is usually regarded as the first in Christian history to give a systematic treatment of the spiritual senses. For Origen, the question of the senses by which spiritual things are felt and known arises in exegesis, concerning how to relate our understanding of God to the metaphors of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching that litter scripture. Origen was clear that in referring to God they could not also refer literally to the five senses of the body, since God is not a bodily thing in the world. Here then is Origen's puzzle: we have senses for feeling God's presence, but they cannot be the senses of the body. His initial answer is to say that there must therefore be a parallel set of senses associated with the spirit, in the mind, or 'spiritual senses' (Rudy 2002: 17–35). In outline, this twofold structure of bodily and spiritual senses is also what we find in others in the tradition, including Augustine.

Gordon Rudy argues that a common mistake in discussions of the spiritual senses is to regard them as merely the expression of an underlying experience which occurs independently of their articulation (Rudy 2002: 73). This is the Jamesian error: to see the experience as defined in its own terms, merely as experience, rather than as bound up with the task of interpretation. In fact, the distinction of a second set of senses turns the experience into a puzzle which demands thought. The second set of senses then is to be seen as a kind of fiction intended to provoke experience in order to enlarge it, as part of the larger anthropological transformation that I have pursued throughout this chapter. The question of experience of God is deliberately opened out and complexified by the idea that experience divides into two parallel streams, bodily and spiritual, which are asserted to be both distinct and yet somehow related and coexisting. The question as to whether there is one set of senses or two arises in all the main historical accounts of the spiritual senses, and it is never given a simple answer (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012). The tradition of the spiritual senses presents a deliberate puzzle.

Teresa is a good example. Teresa emphasizes the difference between mystical and other experience by first of all contrasting the spiritual senses with ordinary sensation. The bodily or 'exterior senses' are contrasted with 'other senses' through which God is felt inwardly (Teresa of Avila, *Spiritual Testimonies* 59.3; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 425–6). But the distinction is then challenged. In her *Life*, when discussing 'imaginative visions' of Christ, she says that the 'eyes of the soul' are used, which are contrasted with the bodily senses, yet this spiritual vision continues to use bodily forms, while receiving the images directly from God (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 29.4, 8; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 238, 242). This represents an intermediate position, where spiritual and bodily senses overlap, while remaining distinct, before her assertion of the greater unity of the soul in the *Interior Castle*. It recurs briefly in Teresa's comment that, even in the highest unions, one should not let go of the humanity of Christ, for 'we are not angels but we have a body' (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 22.10; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987: 195). Her early position in the *Life*, however, is that there is a strong separation between the body and the spirit. Later though, in the *Interior Castle*, as we have seen, she provides the vital step towards asserting unity-in-difference between the two sets of senses, where the bodily forms encountered in the imaginative vision of Christ enter right into the centre of the soul, joining the deepest point of unmediated union with God (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 7.2.2; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1980: 433).

Teresa's treatment of the spiritual senses tracks the development of her understanding of experience in mystical theology. The spiritual senses, having first been contrasted with the bodily senses, become more anthropologically unified at the height of mystical transformation. But even here, they remain twofold, and the distinction between the inner and outer parts of the soul is maintained; only now they 'work together', according to her image of Mary and Martha. The distinction ensures that experience of God is never reduced to mere bodily sensation, while continuing to use bodily sensation as the provocation to spiritual growth, in the puzzling character of the experience as both bodily and more than bodily. It turns out that the language of spiritual sensation does not merely name a 'second set' of senses but serves to differentiate two levels, human and divine, within an expanded view of experience as a whole. Both are encompassed in the unified soul, on the model of Christ's anthropology. We see that the spiritual senses mark out a process of epistemological differentiation and integration in relation to God, which reflects the two-natured Christ, to attain growth into what Ayres called the 'Christological epistemology'.

CONCLUSION

Mystical theology does not approach the question of experience with a certain experience in mind, called mystical experience, which it then proceeds to define theologically. It seeks rather to open up the puzzle that experience of God presents, in its dual character as both fully felt and beyond grasping. The puzzle provokes the subject to a

deeper self-examination, to ask what this capacity is for such experience. It sets in motion the transformation of the whole person, which takes Christ's anthropology and capacity for experience of God as its model. Mystical theology charts this journey, seeking to hold together its excessive, untameable character as unmediated union with God, with its humanity as growth of the whole person in the world and in relation to others.

The effect is to resist the notion that there is any one kind of experience that can be called mystical. There is mystical experience, in the sense that experience as a whole can be filled with God at the 'unmediated' level of the human-divine unity in Christ. But it is of the nature of such deep experience to be felt in all kinds of different forms. It can be felt dramatically as to Augustine at Ostia; or in the negative terms of sheer dispossession of Eckhart; or in the affective response to scriptural reading, as for Bernard; or in the ecstatic, out of body sensation received by Teresa. Or, according the same thinkers, it can equally be felt as an ordinary kind of loving self-presence, as for Augustine in *On the Trinity*; or in the ever-present 'ground', available 'by the fireside or in the stable', as for Eckhart; or in the sense of overflow from the depths of God, in which the whole soul and body joins, extending outwards to good works for others, as for Teresa. What holds these experiences together is not their experiential character as such but the process of growth that underpins them and gives them their rationale. They share a mystical centre point of unity with God which gradually comes to expression, bringing all parts of experience with it. Any human experience can be appropriated in this task: the positive, in terms of growth into the perfection of Christ's humanity, and the negative, as pointing to the excessive character of the divine nature, which can be identified with Christ's suffering, nevertheless leading to fuller humanity. In response to this puzzle, every experience becomes part of an unmediated divine presence that is found everywhere, in both the ordinary and the extraordinary.

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McGinn (2001); Turner (1995).

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CHAPTER 4

THE GENEALOGY OF MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

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MYSTICAL theology, like doctrinal theology or moral theology, has enjoyed a long history. It was not until the modern era that explicit histories of Christian doctrine emerged in the German Protestant tradition of *Dogmengeschichte*. Histories of moral theology arrived soon thereafter. In the mid-nineteenth century Johann Josef von Görres (1776–1848) pioneered a multi-volume account of Christian mysticism and its diabolical imitators, but this was scarcely serious history. In the twentieth century Catholics issued the first historical surveys of Christian spirituality, such as that of Pierre Pourrat (1871–1957), which was of limited value due to the author’s misunderstanding of the relation between spirituality and mysticism (Pourrat 1917–28). Fortunately, the monumental Jesuit project, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique doctrine et histoire* (1937–94), the major contribution of twentieth-century theology to this field of research, made clear by its title a more inclusive approach. A *dictionnaire* is not a history, however, but materials to be shaped into a coherent account. Such accounts were published in the second half of the previous century, but with understandably mixed results, given the magnitude of the material involved.¹

Histories of mysticism had to wait until the end of the twentieth century (see Ruh 1990–9; McGinn 1991–). In addition, a number of individual volumes dealing with mystical theology (e.g. McIntosh 1998), as well as some companions and handbooks on mysticism, have appeared over the past two decades (e.g. Hollywood and Beckman 2012; Lamm 2013). Nevertheless, the growing interest in mysticism as a cross-cultural and multi-religious phenomenon argues for the need for new and more ambitious studies of its many aspects, not least the mystical theology (*theologia mystica*) of the Christian tradition. This chapter seeks to provide a map of the historical development of mystical theology, predicated on the conviction that almost all mystics have a theology, whether

¹ Two major histories of spirituality appeared post-1950. The first was the 4-vol. Bouyer et al. (1960–6). The second was McGinn et al. (1985–9).

explicit or implicit.² Due to the scope of all that might be included under the heading, what follows will be nothing more than a large-scale map, not an exploration of the particular territories, or domains, of mystical theology, topics that will be explored in the other chapters of this volume.

Previous scholarship often presented the history of mysticism under the heading of various schools of spirituality and/or mysticism, but this approach has become dubious due to the difficulty of specifying what would constitute a 'school' (e.g. are all Franciscan mystics necessarily part of a Franciscan School?). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to search for more dynamic terms to delineate the broad traditions that have characterized the history of mystical theology and that may help us see the links between various mystical teachers. 'Trajectories' is one term that expresses something of this dynamism, but this chapter will use 'genealogy' as a tool to indicate how traditions of mystical thought have often possessed basic similarities, but also allowed for multiple variations and realizations over the centuries. Obviously, this sketch of genealogies is more a pedagogical tool than an instrument for detailed analysis. It is heuristic, not declarative. Many mystical authors could be placed into one or more of the following genealogies, but one can argue that they fit best under one bloodline, whatever miscegenation might have occurred. We might also contemplate adding more genealogies to the ones discussed here, but too many genealogies would be confusing and counterproductive.

What then is a genealogy? What are its basic characteristics? How do these distinguish it from other terms that might be used? What are the lines of begetting or transmission? For the purposes of this chapter, a genealogy is a particular way of approaching the core themes of mystical theology that not only has a more or less identifiable historical origin, but that also has enjoyed a temporal succession, most times for centuries. (Thus, for example, we can speak of the Dionysian genealogy, but not of an Eriugenean genealogy, because the Irish thinker fits within the Dionysian heritage, at least to a large extent, but he had few real descendants.) The identifying characteristics of genealogies should be sufficient to provide them with a recognizable physiognomy, a kind of 'family resemblance'. Obviously, the intermarriage of lines will often blur these resemblances, but not totally obliterate them. For example, both the Dionysian tradition and the Western monastic genealogy influenced the birth of Franciscan mysticism, but the characteristics of Franciscan mysticism, such as the centrality of the figure of Francis and a particular kind of devotion to Christ's passion, allow us to identify a Franciscan genealogy of mysticism, although not all Franciscans have followed it. Language has a role to play, but more in the birth of a genealogical line than in its later history, when translation allows for the transmission of an identifiable type of mystical theology into different languages. The modes of transmission of genealogies are many: more or less direct begetting from a teacher to his pupils and followers (e.g. Eckhart to Tauler and Suso); a literary tradition when one mystic, sometimes centuries after, is inspired by writings of the past; and, special to Christianity, the role of religious orders in passing on one (and sometimes

² If pressed for a definition or description, I would simply say that mystical theology is reflection on the ultimate goal of Christian faith, hope, and love, both theoretically and practically conceived.

several) mystical genealogies. The outline that follows is chronological down to the time of the crisis of mysticism at the end of the seventeenth century, but with an insistence that genealogical lines not only continue over centuries, but also intermingle and are capable of being revived within new historical contexts.

PATRISTIC GENEALOGIES

Eastern Christian Mysticism

The mystical element within Christianity is rooted in scripture and in the early life of the church, but did not become a theology, that is, an organized body of thought and teaching, until the third century CE. Mystical theology in the proper sense originated in Alexandria with Clement (c.150–c.215) and Origen (185–254). Both teachers used themes taken from Greek religious philosophy to help express Christian faith, although they broke with Platonic philosophy, especially in the biblical basis of their teaching about the divine nature, creation, and the path to salvation revealed by Jesus. For both men, the truest Christian was the ‘gnostic’, the believer who was able to go beyond outward rites and practices to attain inner knowledge and union with the Redeemer. Origen was the major initiator—a Protean thinker who still provokes disagreements. One of the paradoxes of the Eastern Christian mystical tradition is that its founding father, Origen, was later condemned as a heretic, and generally silenced in the tradition. Nevertheless, as Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, ‘there is no thinker in the church who is so invisibly all-present as Origen’ (Balthasar 1984a: 2).

Origen’s mystical theology is fundamentally biblical—it is on the basis of personal appropriation of the inner meaning of the biblical text that the soul ‘is ready to come to dogmatic and mystical matters and arise to the contemplation of divinity with pure spiritual love’ (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue; Lawson 1957: 44 adapted; also see Crouzel 1989). He anchored his view of the upward journey (*anagoge*) of the fallen soul and its higher dimension (*pneuma*) to a state of contemplation and union with God within the context of a theology of *exitus et reditus* (procession and return) that raised questions about its orthodoxy (e.g. is there a universal return of all spirits to God?). Origen’s mystical theory included a programme of spiritual practices of prayer, asceticism, biblical study, and the like, one that fell into a broad threefold pattern (beginning–progressing–culminating), the ancestor of the most widespread itinerary of Christian mysticism (purgation–illumination–union). This mystical theology found an institutional home in the monasticism that arose in the fourth century CE, especially in the person of Evagrius Ponticus (345–99), who systematized and in some cases deepened the Alexandrian’s mysticism. Evagrius also proved controversial, but he had a large influence, both in the East (especially through translations into Syriac) and in the West. The late fourth-century *Spiritual Homilies* ascribed to Macarius the Great of Egypt

provide another witness to Eastern Christian mysticism. It was also within Eastern monasticism, if somewhat later, that we find the beginnings of the Orthodox practice of 'Hesychast Prayer', that is, the prayer of the heart seeking inner peace and even a vision of divine light through regulated breathing practices and repetition of the name of Jesus. This prayer and the theology around it form a central thread in Eastern Christian mysticism.

If Origen was the founder of the Eastern patristic tradition of mystical theology, the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa) were the centre and touchstone of later developments. The Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–94), vindicate the truth of Vladimir Lossky's claim that, 'The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology... There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism' (Lossky 1957: 7–8). The Cappadocians broke with Origen's view of a limited God and the possibility of a succession of falls and returns from the heavenly world by constructing a rigorous negative (apophatic) theology of divine infinity and, especially with Gregory, the notion of the mystical goal as an endless 'stretching forth' (*epektasis*) of the devout soul into the divine mystery (see Daniélou 1944).

Later forms of mystical theology in Eastern Christianity have received their own labels, such as the Byzantine mysticism of Maximus the Confessor (c.590–662) and Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), or the Palamite mysticism of the theorist of Hesychasm, Gregory Palamas (c.1296–1359). The movement of mystical themes from the Orthodox monastic centre of Mount Athos into Slavic-speaking lands, as witnessed in the dissemination of the handbook of mystical texts called the *Philokalia* of the end of the eighteenth century, sparked the great age of mysticism in Russia, embracing such figures as Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) and Theophane the Recluse (1815–94). The most influential work of Russian mysticism is *The Pilgrim's Tale*, stories about an anonymous wandering devotee of the Jesus prayer, which developed gradually between about 1859 and 1884 (*The Pilgrim's Tale*; Pentkovsky and Smith 1999). From the genealogical perspective, it is possible to argue that all these developments, varied as they are, constitute lineal descendants of the Eastern Christian mysticism formed between the second and the fourth centuries CE.

Dionysian Mysticism

A figure of the Greek-speaking East who did initiate a separate genealogy was the anonymous author who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite (see Acts 17: 34; Balthasar 1984b: 144–210). Sometime shortly before 500 CE, this monk composed a small corpus of writings (*The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and some letters) that were to have a large influence and many descendants, though more in the West than in the East. Deeply influenced by the Cappadocians, Dionysius also turned to late Greek Neoplatonic philosophy, especially Proclus (d. 485), to help construct a new account of 'mystical

theology,' which he also was the first to name. Dionysius is best known for his apophatic teaching on God as the mystery beyond all affirmation *and* all negation to be attained by plunging, as did Moses the archetypal mystic, 'into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing... where, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the Wholly Unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing' (*Mystical Theology* 1.3; Luibheid 1987: 137 adapted). The Dionysian mystical programme is a complex mixture of positive and negative procedures and rituals—symbolic, biblical, and ritual—involving both the ecclesiastical and the celestial realms organized into hierarchies that energize the upward journey to the hidden God. While among the most difficult of Christian mystical theologians, Dionysius has also been widely influential.

The generations of the Dionysian lineage are still being explored (see Rorem 1993; Coakley and Stang 2009). In the East Dionysius's corpus influenced Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, although Maximus worked to bring Dionysian theology into conformity with the established Orthodox consensus, especially in terms of Christology. Dionysius was known to later Greek mystical thinkers, but often criticized. The revival of Orthodox theology in the past century has renewed the study of the Dionysian corpus, but with strongly divided evaluations. In the West an Irish thinker at the Carolingian court, John Scotus Eriugena (c.800–c.870), was deeply indebted to Dionysius. An original philosopher, theologian, biblical exegete, as well as a mystic, Eriugena's *summa*, *Periphyseon* (*On Nature*), is a major synthesis in which aspects of Western theology (Augustine, Ambrose, Boethius) are intertwined with Greek thinkers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus, and Dionysius, whom he translated into Latin.

Dionysius's corpus was now available in the West, but for the next three centuries he remained a name, not a force. In the twelfth century, however, Hugh of St Victor foreshadowed a new chapter in the story of Dionysianism by writing an Augustinianizing comment on *The Celestial Hierarchy*. In the thirteenth century the last of the Victorine mystical theologians, Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), commented several times on the whole Dionysian corpus and sought to show that it formed the theoretical side of a single mystical theology whose affective aspect was expressed in the biblical Song of Songs. This perhaps unlikely marriage gave birth to what has been called 'Affective Dionysianism,' that is, forms of mysticism in which the anagogic passage up to the divine mystery is achieved by an impetus of love culminating in the *apex affectus* (the summit of erotic yearning). Various forms of affective Dionysianism can be found among Franciscans, like Bonaventure, Carthusians, like Hugh of Balma, the English *Cloud of Unknowing* (possibly by a Carthusian), the early Jean Gerson, as well as others. These mystics were all touched by the Dionysian lineage, whether we wish to include them in it directly or not.

New translations of the Dionysian corpus sparked the interests of the scholastics. A few decades after the efforts of Gallus, the Dominican Albert the Great (c.1200–89) commented on all the Dionysian writings from his own perspective, emphasizing the related roles of knowing, loving, and faith in the path to union with the unknown God. For Albert the purity of intellect as intellect (not everyday reason) has a decisive role: 'It

is necessary to be united to God through intellect and to praise him by word' (Albert the Great, *Commentary on Mystical Theology* 2; my tr.).³ Albert's initiative established a tradition that might be called 'Intellective Dionysianism', one that was strong in the late Middle Ages, both with Dominicans, such as Eckhart and his followers, and with other thinkers, for example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). It is not necessary to see all these mystics as lineal descendants of Dionysius, but their thought cannot be understood apart from the Dionysian genealogy. Much the same is true for the later influence of Dionysius in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries among some Spanish and especially French mystics—an area of research in need of further exploration.

Western Patristic Mysticism

The Western Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries also established a mystical genealogy. Almost all later Western mystics had contact with Ambrose, Augustine, and John Cassian. Cassian, for example, was omnipresent among medieval monastic mystics and formative for the spirituality of the Mendicants. While Ambrose was less influential, the figure of Augustine of Hippo (354–428) dominates later Western theology as no other thinker, not least in the area of mystical theology. All later generations of Western mystics depend to some degree on this Western patristic origin, even if they went beyond it in creating their own genealogies.

Ambrose of Milan (c.339–97) was widely read in Neoplatonic philosophy and in some of the Eastern Fathers, especially Origen. His contribution to the Western patristic line has often been overlooked in the shadow of his catechumen, Augustine. Both with regard to the use of the Song of Songs as a key biblical text for mystical teaching (something avoided by Augustine), as well as in his rich description of the soul's ascent to union with God, Ambrose was a pioneer.

Augustinus mysticus was at one time a controversial title, but its legitimacy is now vindicated. The bishop of Hippo's genius was formative for many aspects of theology in his day and afterward, but there have been some who insisted that he is not *really* a mystic in the sense of someone like Eckhart, Teresa, or John of the Cross. Nevertheless, if mystical theology concerns a coherent account of attaining a direct, loving, and transformative contact with God in this life as the foretaste of the beatific vision, who can deny the bishop of Hippo the title of both mystic and teacher of mystical theology (Burnaby 1938; Van Fleteren et al. 1994)? Modern readers tend to focus on his *Confessions*, especially the explorations of yearning for and brief attaining of God found in books 7, 9, and 10; but to get a full sense of the Trinitarian, ecclesial, biblical, and

³ Albert the Great's student, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), followed him in seeing union and the vision of God in primarily intellective terms, though love is not neglected. Thomas never wrote on mystical theology as such, but his doctrinal theology (*sacra doctrina*) includes treatment of many of the major themes of mysticism, such contemplation, rapture, and union both here and hereafter.

liturgical grounding of Augustine's mystical teaching one needs to look further, especially into his *The Trinity* and the lengthy *Sermons on the Psalms*.

The third founder of the Western patristic lineage was John Cassian (c.360–c.430), a Latin-speaking monk from the East who had deep experience of Eastern monastic life, especially the theology of Evagrius (Stewart 1998). After Cassian's move to Gaul, he wrote two books that became central to Western mysticism, especially in the monastic tradition. The first was the *Institutes*, describing the rules for the monastic life and the hindrances to the monk's life; the second was the *Conferences*, a series of remembered conversations with the desert fathers about the fundamental religious practices of the monks, especially mystical prayer.

MEDIEVAL GENEALOGIES

Western Monastic Mysticism

Despite differences among the orders of monks and canons (Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, and Victorines) between 600 and 1200, there is a basic commonality among the mystical writers of these orders, one that has formed a kind of *basso continuo* in the later story of Western mysticism, due to the role of figures like Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hugh and Richard of St Victor.⁴ The founding figure was Pope Gregory the Great (reigned 590–604), who is often seen as a patristic figure, but who is also the fountain head of Western monastic mysticism. As Patrick Catry put it: 'Saint Benedict gave the monks of the West a *Rule*. Gregory gave them a mysticism' (Catry 1984: 214; see McGinn 1994: 34–79). Second only to Augustine, Gregory was read and appreciated by almost all later Western mystics, not only Catholics, but also Protestants. Like the earlier patristic authors, as well as the monks down through the twelfth century, his mystical theology was thoroughly biblical, expressed in his lengthy *Moral Exposition on Job (Moralia)*, his *Homilies on the Gospels*, and his most penetrating work, the *Homilies on Ezekiel*. Three major themes dominate Gregory's teaching about mystical interiority—longing for God (*desiderium*), compunction, and contemplation—issues that were to remain central in Western mysticism. Gregory harnessed the power of desire for God to expound a spiritual programme that was primarily designed for monks and clerics, but that could also be adapted for laity. A central theme was 'compunction', or piercing of the heart, which had a biblical foundation (Acts 2: 37), but which Gregory expanded to become a central spiritual attitude, leading from intense sorrow for sin (*compunctio timoris*) to the *compunctio amoris*, i.e., being pierced with love of God. The goal of created humanity was contemplation, undivided attention to God. 'The human person was created to contemplate the Creator so that he might always

⁴ The English Benedictine, Cuthbert Butler (1858–1934), was the first to highlight this genealogy in his *Western Mysticism* (Butler 1922).

seek his beauty and dwell in the solemnity of his love' (Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 8.18.34; my tr.). Adam had this, but lost it in the Fall. The possibility of attaining contemplation has been restored, if only partially, by Christ through his redeeming action. All Christians are now called to imitate Christ, not only by compassionate love of neighbour, but especially through cleansing the 'eye of the soul' to attain whatever contemplation God will grant them in this life.

The Benedictine monks of the early Middle Ages (600–1100) carried on the mystical teaching of the Latin Fathers and Gregory the Great, but without producing significant new developments. It was in the twelfth century, the Golden Age of monastic theology, that both the 'Black Monks', that is, Benedictines (e.g. Hildegard of Bingen, d. 1179), and especially the new reformed orders of 'White Monks' (Cistercians), Carthusians, and the reformed canons of St Victor, who lived a monastic-style life, achieved the classic phase of Western monastic mysticism (Leclercq 1961). Founded in 1098, the Cistercians used the Rule of Benedict, but as interpreted in their own reforming documents, especially the Charter of Charity. Returning to a simpler, less cluttered, and more independent monastic life encouraged greater attention to personal prayer and mystical practice within the monastery, conceived of as the *schola Christi*, 'the School of Christ'. Under the leadership of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the Cistercians produced a group of mystical theologians, such as William of St Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Isaac of Stella (to name just the most noted), who are still among the most read of Western mystics.

Cistercian mystical theology features a play of variations on a number of central themes common to most of the early White Monks (McGinn 2012: 218–32). Cistercian theology is firmly based on faith, but emphasized the formula, *credo ut experiar*, that is, 'I believe in order that I may experience [God's love]'. The foundations of the mystical teaching of the Cistercians are found in their doctrine of God (especially the Spirit-centred mysticism of William of St Thierry), as well as in theological anthropology, Christology, and ecclesiology. In these three latter areas Bernard made important contributions that influenced the other Cistercians. For the White Monks love (*caritas*) is the key to all—the proper understanding of the God who is love, the love displayed by Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection, and the love by which we respond to Jesus. This begins with what Bernard called 'the carnal love of Christ's humanity' (*amor carnalis Christi*), and proceeds through the stages of loving meditation and service that culminate in *amor sponsalis*, the spousal love between Christ and the soul revealed in the Song of Songs, on which Bernard, William, and a number of later Cistercians wrote commentaries. This union with Christ, which is also a deification, is fundamentally the work of love, but a love that grants a form of intuitive understanding of God—*amor ipse intelligentia est* ('Love itself is a form of understanding'), one of the leitmotifs of Cistercian mystical theology. In the thirteenth century Cistercian mysticism was carried forward by female mystics, such as the Flemish Beatrice of Nazareth (d. c.1250) and the German Cistercian nuns of the community at Helfta at the end of the century.

The twelfth century saw not only new monastic reform movements, but also attempts to renew the canonical life of clerics living a monastic-style piety. For the history of

mystical theology the most important of these reforms was that of the Abbey of St Victor founded at Paris in 1108, where a succession of teachers, especially Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141) and Richard of St Victor (d. 1173), pioneered combining themes from traditional patristic and monastic mystical teaching (e.g. Augustine, Dionysius, Gregory, etc.) with the new organizing and ordering mentality of nascent scholasticism (Chase 2003). The Victorines can be described as the first systematizers of mystical theology in the West, although their treatises were still biblical in essence. Hugh wrote important pedagogical and doctrinal works, as well several short mystical tracts and three treatises on the account of Noah's ark in Genesis 6. The central book is *Noah's Moral Ark*, which combines an allegorical-doctrinal reading of the ark with a tropological-anagogical interpretation as a symbol of the soul's transformative ascent to God. Richard wrote two major mystical works. *The Twelve Patriarchs*, which interprets the Genesis account of Joseph, his wives, concubines, and children as an allegory of how the soul's powers of knowing and loving function in the path to mystical contemplation, while *The Mystical Ark* (on Exodus 25) is an exposition of the forms of contemplation. In addition, Richard's short work, *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity*, is among the most influential treatments of erotic mysticism.

It would be a mistake to think that the tradition of Western monastic mysticism died out after 1200, but its glory days were over. This genealogy was influential on almost all later forms of Western mysticism, especially through the widely read Bernard. Some later Benedictines, such as the fifteenth-century John of Kastl (d. c.1430) and the sixteenth-century Louis de Blois (d. 1566), continued to produce mystical teaching, and the figure of the Cistercian Thomas Merton (1915–68) shows that new generations of this genealogy can continue to contribute much to the story of mystical theology.

Franciscan Mysticism

Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) is not only among the most famous saints in Christian history, but also a significant vernacular theologian, as his sparse writings demonstrate. Francis's personality and teaching form the ground of the Franciscan mysticism created in the thirteenth century, one that remains strong to the present.⁵ Francis himself said nothing directly about his mystical gifts, but the hagiographical lives, beginning with the *First Life* by Thomas of Celano (1228–9), already present him as a visionary, an ecstatic, and (above all) the saint whose perfect exterior and interior conformity to Christ led him to being given the stigmata, that is, the visible appearance of the wounds of the suffering Christ on his body as a sign of his seraphic love. In a manner different from other religious founders, Francis the stigmatic, the perfect image of Christ's saving love, became the core of a new genealogical tradition—Franciscan mysticism.

Some of Francis's early followers, such as Giles of Assisi (c.1190–1262), do not focus on Francis himself, but Giles's reputation as an ecstatic visionary and mystic, a hermit and

⁵ For a survey of early Franciscan mysticism, see McGinn (1998: 70–152).

dissident, as well as his teaching as reflected in his *Sayings (Dicta)*, are reminiscent of the founder's views on divine love. The German friar, David of Augsburg (d. 1272), who wrote an important mystical handbook in the 1240s, mostly reflects Western monastic mysticism, not distinctly Franciscan themes. Francis's first female disciple, Clare of Assisi (1193–1253), forms a special case. The few writings of the aristocratic Clare mostly reflect monastic, especially Cistercian, mysticism; but her devotion to poverty and her fixation on the figure of Francis, announce major themes of properly Franciscan mysticism. In the *Testament* she wrote late in life she says: 'The Son of God became our way, which our most holy father Francis, his true lover and imitator, showed and taught us by word and example' (Clare of Assisi, *Testament* 2; my tr.).

The main tradition of Franciscan mysticism was the creation of Bonaventure (1217–74), the seventh General of the order, and one of the most influential writers in the history of Christian mysticism. Bonaventure was widely read in the Latin patristic mystics, as well as the monastic mystics. He also knew the Dionysian writings, especially in the reading given them by Thomas Gallus. Both a scholastic and a mystic, Bonaventure forged these traditions into something new—a form of structured love mysticism which put the order and beauty of the created cosmos and the earthly life of Christ, especially his poverty and Passion, as viewed through the figure of Francis, at the centre of what the General memorably called *The Mind's Journey into God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*. With Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure was among the most read of medieval mystics in the centuries that followed. *The Mind's Journey*, the treatise called *The Triple Way* (an analysis of the traditional pattern of purgation–illumination–union), and the *Large Life (Legenda major)* of Francis (more a treatise on Francis as mystical exemplar than a biography), all had an impact for centuries. In both *The Mind's Journey* and the *Large Life* Bonaventure presents Francis as the ideal combination of contemplation and action. Towards the conclusion of *The Mind's Journey*, he says: 'There Francis passed over into God through contemplative rapture and was established as an example of perfect contemplation, just as he had been previously of action' (*Mind's Journey* 7.3; my tr.).

Bonaventure's fame led to many later Franciscan writings being circulated under his name, for example, the mystical handbook of the German friar Rudolph of Biberach, *The Seven Roads of Eternity* (c.1300). Shortly before 1300 the Italian James of Milan wrote a Bonaventuran treatise on Christ's Passion called *The Goad of Love (Stimulus amoris)* that circulated widely in many forms and translations. The most popular of all these works was *The Meditations on the Life of Christ*, written in Latin by a Tuscan friar about 1300. The work was translated into at least eight languages and had influence for centuries. The Franciscan devotion to the Passion in these works often uses Francis as their model, because 'through the impression of the sacred stigmata, he was totally transformed into him [i.e. Christ]' (*Meditations*, Prologue; my tr.). Mystical contemplation of Christ on the cross, devotion to the figure of Francis, as well as to absolute poverty seen as an identifying mark of Francis's likeness of Christ was also found among Franciscan 'Spirituals', such as Peter John Olivi (d. 1298), Ubertino of Casale (d. c.1330), and especially the mystical poet Jacopone of Todi (d. 1306).

The Franciscan mystical genealogy is rich in female mystics. After Clare, the earliest was Douceline of Digne (d. 1274), the sister of one of the French leaders of the Spirituals. The imitation of the Passion manifested in Francis is evident in the *Life* of Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297), written by her Franciscan confessor. The most noted of the Franciscan women mystics was Angela of Foligno (d. 1309). The evidence for this remarkable mystic comes in the form of a mystical narrative (the *Life*, or *Memorial*) and a series of teachings, *Instructions*, given to her followers. Both works are the product of a collaboration between the illiterate woman and her Franciscan confessor known only as Brother A. While the late medieval Franciscan genealogy does not feature many important male mystics, the Franciscans continued to produce significant female mystics, of whom the most noted was Catherine of Bologna (d. 1463), the leader of the Poor Clare community of Corpus Domini and the author of the mystical treatise *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*. Later examples of Franciscan female mystics include Camilla Battista of Varano (d. 1524) and Capuchin abbess Veronica Giuliani (d. 1727).

Late Medieval Vernacular Mysticism

One of the distinctive features of the new forms of mysticism that became evident in the early thirteenth century was the production of mystical literature in the rapidly developing vernacular languages of Western Europe. While both men and women contributed to this proliferation, the use of the native tongue allowed more women to gain a voice. Various forms of vernacular mysticism often feature a 'conversational model' in which illiterate or semi-literate women converse with their male clerical confessors to produce texts; some mystical writings also feature a kind of conversation between the learned Latin of the tradition and the creative new possibilities found in the vernacular. These vernacular mysticisms (German, Dutch, French, Italian, English) cannot be described as a single genealogical line, but represent a group of linguistic traditions dealing with many of the same issues and a new moment in the historical evolution of Western mysticism. Here, we can only give a brief survey.

German Mysticism

The earliest major German-language mystic was the beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210–c.1280), whose *Flowing Light of the Godhead* comprises a variety of brief chapters of different genres (poems, conversations, mini-treatises, visions, plays, etc.) collected in seven books. These pieces were taken down by Mechthild's Dominican friends in her native Low German, but survive in somewhat different Latin and Middle High German versions. The key figure in the development of German mysticism was the Dominican preacher and teacher Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1328). Eckhart twice held the Dominican chair of theology at Paris and had a profound knowledge of many of the mystical traditions of the past, especially Augustine and Dionysius. His surviving Latin works (mostly biblical commentaries) and his vernacular treatises and roughly 120 sermons show how the conversation between forms of Latin mysticism and the call

of the vernacular *cura animarum* was instrumental in producing a new and challenging mystical teaching. Eckhart's core teaching concerned the *grunt*, or ground—the mystery of the hidden depth where God and the soul are not just capable of being united, but, at least on some level, are one and the same: 'God's ground is the soul's ground and the soul's ground is God's ground' (German Sermon 12; my tr.; see McGinn 2001: 83–194). Eckhart's daring view of indistinct union and other aspects of his mystical theology were popular, but this did not prevent a condemnation of twenty-eight articles from his works by Pope John XXII in 1329. Nevertheless, Eckhart's teaching, modified and corrected by some of his followers, but pushed to even more extreme positions by others, created a genealogy that produced descendants well into the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries.

A significant body of Pseudo-Eckhartian works (treatises and sermons) exists, and a circle of mostly Dominican mystical preachers of the fourteenth century echo the themes of his teaching. The foremost of Eckhart's followers were two other Dominicans. Henry Suso (c.1295–1366) wrote mostly in German and mingled a modified Eckhartianism with other forms of mystical language, including imitation of the Passion and strongly erotic themes, in order to create what he called a *philosophia spiritualis*, a spiritual love of wisdom to guide male and female Dominicans and their lay followers. John Tauler (c.1300–61) left behind a corpus of German sermons preached to Dominican nuns and the 'friends of God', devout lay seekers of mystical union. Tauler was widely read in the later Middle Ages and was taken up and praised by Luther, so that he has the distinction of being perhaps the most continuously read of medieval mystics. A mystical preacher who is close to Tauler in his combination of a modified Eckhartianism with other forms of mysticism is the Franciscan Marquard of Lindau (d. 1392). Late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Germany saw the appearance of a number of mystical treatises, such as the *Theologia Deutsch*. These are often rather independent of the Eckhartian line. Finally, the figure of Nicholas of Cusa should be mentioned. Cusa wrote mostly in Latin. He knew Eckhart and even Eriugena, and was a profound student of Dionysius. His mystical theology, however, is very much his own creation—blending many genealogies into a distinctive vision.

Flemish Mysticism

Flemish mysticism is not as well known as it should be, probably due to restricted knowledge of that language. Along with Beatrice of Nazareth mentioned above, the first important mystical author was a literary genius—a beguine called Hadewijch (probably mid-thirteenth century), whose writings in both prose and verse were little studied until the modern era. The key figure in this tradition is the Augustinian canon Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381) from the monastery of Groenendal near Brussels. His dozen mystical treatises feature a distinctive Trinitarian mysticism, one whose themes influenced many later Flemish and Dutch mystics and which even had some international dissemination due to translation into Latin. In the fifteenth century there were some mystics in the ascetic reform movement of the 'Modern Devotion' (*devotio moderna*), such as Gerlach Peters (d. 1411) and Alijt Bake (d. 1455). The Dutch Franciscan Hendrik

Herp (d. 1477) wrote an important mystical handbook, *The Mirror of Perfection*, which was widely used in its Latin version. Even in the sixteenth century the Low Countries continued to produce mystical texts that showed the influence of Ruusbroec and even themes from Eckhart, as we can see in two anonymous female productions, *The Evangelical Pearl* (c.1530–40) and the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* from around the same time.

French and Italian Mysticism

French-language mysticism of the late Middle Ages was sparse, but it counts one masterpiece, the French beguine Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, written c.1290 and condemned and burnt, along with its author, in 1310. Marguerite's daring work uses the conventions of courtly literature to set forth a deep speculative mystical theology whose teaching on annihilation and indistinct union seems to have had some resonance with Eckhart. Despite the condemnation of the book, it was translated into several languages and continued to be read in later centuries, though without establishing anything like a separate genealogy.

Much of the Italian mystical literature of the late Middle Ages was of Franciscan origin, but Italian mysticism also features two collections of writings connected to noted women outside the Franciscan ambit: the Dominican tertiary, Catherine of Siena (1347–80), and the lay mystic, Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510). Catherine of Siena had a truly astonishing career, not only as a famous ecstatic and visionary, but also as a reformer and force in the confused ecclesio-political scene of Italy at the time of the Avignon captivity and beginning of the Great Western Schism. Catherine left hundreds of letters, as well as a number of prayers, but her major mystical work is *The Dialogue*, an account of her conversations with God written down in 1377–8. Catherine's mystical theology is unique, though her Dominican friends and advisers doubtless helped her hone her message centred on the mystery of redemption in the blood of Christ. Catherine of Genoa, on the other hand, left no writings of her own, but her circle of admirers and co-workers in the apostolic work of serving the poor and the sick put together two treatises (*Purgation and Purgatory*, and *The Spiritual Dialogue*) along with a *Life* of the saint, materials not published until 1531. Catherine's mysticism of pure love and purgation is powerful, if somewhat narrow in scope.

English Mysticism

Middle English also saw the development of a mystical literature, especially in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Fanous and Gillespie 2011). The major English mystics do not form a single coherent group, although they often dealt with similar issues. The lay hermit Richard Rolle (c.1300–49) was learned and eccentric, writing in both Latin and English. His many works, especially the popular *Fire of Love* (*Incendium amoris*) feature a somatic and erotic mysticism emphasizing a triad of heavenly gifts—*fervor*, *canor*, *dulcor* (heat, heavenly song, and sweetness). In his major work, *The Ladder of Perfection*, the Augustinian Walter Hilton (c.1340–96) sought to summarize the riches of the past, especially the Augustinian, Cistercian, and Victorine mystical traditions, in a

form that would be accessible to English readers, even the laity. More original was the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and its related treatises (e.g. *The Book of Private Counsel*). This contemporary of Hilton's is one of the outstanding representatives of the affective Dionysianism of the late Middle Ages, although his practical teaching includes advice about modes of prayer and practice that reflect his context as a spiritual director.

The most striking of the English mystics was the anchoress Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1417). On 13 May 1373, as she lay dying, Julian received a number of visions of Christ on the cross which granted her a miraculous recovery. She spent many years meditating on these 'showings', composing both a short account (*A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*) not long after the event, and a long and more theologically sophisticated treatment, *A Revelation of Love*, possibly in the 1390s. It is difficult to give an adequate summary of Julian's original mystical theology, although it is summed up in a famous passage, where Christ asks her, 'What, would you know your Lord's meaning in this? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love' (*A Revelation* 86; my tr.). Thus, love has three forms: *charite unmade*, or the divine nature; *charite made* (the soul in God), and *charite geven* (virtue), 'in which we love God for himself, and ourselves for God, and all that God loves for God' (*A Revelation* 84; my tr.). This is the essence of Julian's teaching. Finally, the lay ecstatic Margery Kempe (1373–c.1440), dictated an account of her mystical gifts in her *Book* during the 1430s, the first English autobiography. Kempe used to be dismissed as a hysteric and fanatic, but a greater appreciation of the role of women in mysticism has shown her links with other late medieval 'excessive' female mystics.

EARLY MODERN GENEALOGIES

Protestant Mysticism

A century ago Protestant mysticism was seen as a contradiction in terms by the regnant Ritschlian school of German Protestant theology, which insisted there was a fundamental distinction between good evangelical faith and the insidious influence of Greek philosophy in Orthodox and Catholic forms of mysticism. This view is now outmoded, as many Protestants (and others) have eagerly explored the varieties of Protestant mysticism (Senn 1986; McGinn 2016). Without claiming that Protestant Christianity has been as favourable to mystical theology as other Christian confessions, the genealogy of Protestant mysticism is an important part of the story. The quarrels of the sixteenth century over the nature of true Christian belief meant that Protestant mystics were often as divided among themselves as they were from those who maintained loyalty to the Church of Rome. Can they, then, be considered as a separate genealogy? Perhaps yes, if we think of their differing form of mystical theology as concentrating on a number of

the same elements, such as the primacy of inner religious experience; an outreach to all believers (though this builds on late medieval mysticism); and a willingness to criticize inherited religious forms and practices.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) is not a mystical theologian in any traditional sense, despite recent attempts to make him a mystic (Hamm 2014; contrast Oberman 1971), but it is undeniable that a number of mystical genealogies played a significant role in the evolution of his theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). Luther rejected Dionysian mysticism because of its lack of attention to the Passion, but he remained favourable to Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard, and most especially to representatives of German mysticism, such as Tauler and the *Theologia Deutsch*, because of their emphasis on passivity in the face of God's action, inner abandonment (*Anfechtung*), and their Passion-centred mysticism. This later allowed for the development of specifically Lutheran forms of mysticism that were often in conflict with the more rigid Protestant scholastic orthodoxy that took up another side of the heritage of the Reformer. The central Lutheran mystic was the widely read German pastor Johann Arndt (1555–1621), whose *True Christianity* (1606–10) threw down the gauntlet to Protestant scholasticism, claiming, 'It is not enough to know God's word; one must also practice it in a living, active manner' (Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, book 1, preface; Erb 1979: 21). Arndt's popular work went beyond Luther in using many medieval mystics as witnesses for the supremacy of inner religious devotion over external religiosity. He downplayed (but did not deny) the objective aspects of evangelical faith by emphasizing the inner appropriation of the kingdom of God and the new birth that leads to deeper union with Jesus. Arndt's protest against merely external religion was revived and nourished in the rise of the German Pietism associated with Jacob Philip Spener (1635–1705) at the end of the seventeenth century. One need not claim that all Pietists were mystics in order to recognize a genealogical relation between Arndt and Pietism.

Many of those who reacted against the late medieval papal religious world at the same time as Luther soon became disillusioned with what they thought was the half-heartedness of his notion of reform. Hence, the rise of the plethora of groups that have been referred to as the Radical Reformation, in which new forms of mysticism flourished (Rother and Stayer 2007). Many of the Radicals were influenced by the stress on interior religion found among late medieval German mystics; some even adopted a speculative theology and anthropology reminiscent of Eckhart and his followers. Nevertheless, the differences are significant between those medieval thinkers who were able to cultivate interior union without abandoning church structures and the Radical Reformers who often eschewed external religious practices and proclaimed an inner religion that welcomed all those seeking God as companions (one of the origins of modern religious toleration). Most of the Radicals who can be thought of as mystics belong to what has been called the 'Spiritual' wing among the Radicals, that is, those primarily concerned with the inner action of the Holy Spirit and therefore not fixated on sacramental and disciplinary issues like infant baptism, or a pure Christian life in separation from the both the Protestant and Catholic church-state systems. Among the most important of the Protestant Spiritualist mystics are Johann Denck (d. 1525), Andreas Karlstadt (d. 1541), Sebastian Francke

(d. 1542), and especially Valentin Weigel (d. 1588), a Lutheran pastor who kept his radical views hidden during his lifetime. The most difficult figure to evaluate is the Lutheran layman Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), an autodidact who produced a large body of mystico-theosophical texts between 1612 and 1624 (Weeks 1991). The Christian story as found in the Bible, as well as aspects of a number of Christian mystical traditions, coexist within Boehme's writings in tandem with a bewildering array of alchemical, kabbalistic, and Renaissance theosophical themes. Boehme has always been a bone of contention: derided as totally confused; hailed as the originator of modern thought; alternately seen as a distinctive Christian mystic, or rejected as a theosophist masquerading as a Christian. The difficulty of understanding where Boehme fits says much about the Protestant mystical genealogy.

The final sub-genealogy within Protestant mysticism is that of the Anglican Church, the national church established by Henry VIII's 'Act of Supremacy' in 1534. The English Reformation tried to find a 'middle way' between Rome and the Continental Reformers as seen in Elizabeth's Settlement of 1559. But not all the English were convinced, so from the end of the sixteenth century there was conflict between the 'Anglicans' who accepted the settlement and the 'Puritans' who desired a religious polity closer to that of Geneva. Both sides produced considerable spiritual, and even mystical, literature. Some of the sermons of Anglican preachers, such as Lancelot Andrewes (d. 1626) and John Donne (d. 1631) contain mystical themes, but Anglican mysticism is best seen in the poetry of Donne, as well as his successors—George Herbert (d. 1633), Henry Vaughan (d. 1695), and Thomas Traherne (d. 1674). On the Puritan side, there was a substantial mystical literature in the form of commentaries on the Song of Songs (e.g. Richard Sibbes), as well as treatises on union with Christ (e.g. Francis Rouse, William Polhill). Finally, England also produced its own version of the radically interior mysticism found on the Continent in the Quaker founder and mystic, George Fox (1624–91).

Reformed Catholic Mysticism

A century ago, the Roman Catholic view of mystical theology was largely content to study what the Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, had to say about attaining union with God and let things go at that, with perhaps a few nods to figures like Augustine, Bernard, and Bonaventure. Nothing speaks more directly to the emergence of a better appreciation of the full scope of the story of mystical theology than the realization that, for all the greatness of Teresa, John, and the other representatives of Catholic mysticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they form but one late genealogy in a long and rich history. Catholic early modern mystics lived in a time when the disputes about doctrinally correct mysticism, growing since the late thirteenth century (e.g. Eckhart and Marguerite Porete) reached a crescendo whose denouement in the Quietist Controversy marked a crisis from which mystical theology, at least in Western Europe, has only begun to recover over the past century. It is often forgotten that many of the mystics now hailed as the paragons of Christian mysticism (e.g. Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross) were often under suspicion by the Inquisition. At the

end of the seventeenth century, a number of mystics were actually condemned by ecclesiastic authority. Once again, these early modern Catholic mystics do not form a single genealogy, but rather constitute a group of mystical traditions facing a common set of issues in the world of divided Christianity.⁶ Among the themes common to the Catholic mystics of this era were: (1) an introspective analysis of the levels of prayer and contemplation; (2) a discrimination between what can be done by one's own efforts with divine help and what is owed only to God (later called acquired and infused contemplation); (3) great attention to the need for discernment in order to identify diabolical deceptions; and (4) much discussion of the various modes of uniting with God. Some have seen the concern with one's own inner states characteristic of many of these mystics as the triumph of a kind psychological phenomenology of mysticism. This is at best only partly true, because we must always remember that these mystics were also anxious to show that their experiences were conformable with the witness of the Bible and the teaching of the Church.

Spain contributed little to mystical theology in the Middle Ages, but this changed dramatically around 1500, as the 'Most Catholic Kingdom' began its rapid ascent to the position of the premier Catholic power in Europe. The reformist tendencies in Spain encouraged mystical interiority, as can be seen with Franciscan authors like Bernardino de Laredo (d. c.1540) and Francisco de Osuna (d. 1541), whose writings opened up the mystical prayer of recollection (*recogimiento*) to all believers. Nevertheless, a number of friars and laity were accused by the Spanish Inquisition of fostering dangerous forms of mystical abandonment to God (*dejamiento*) and claiming interior illumination that put them beyond the requirements of external religion. Repeated condemnations of these 'Enlightened Ones' (*Alumbrados*) beginning in 1525 led to growing fears of the danger of mystical prayer, especially among women. Imprisoned several times by the Inquisition, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuits, was hailed by his followers as able to combine both action and contemplation (*in actione contemplativus*). The account of his life (the *Acta*) that he dictated in his last years shows that his conversion was accompanied by numerous visions and other mystical experiences. Even more important are the surviving fragments of the *Spiritual Diary* he kept, a day-by-day account of extraordinary mystical gifts (visions, unions, the gift of tears, etc.) that mostly took place in relation to his celebration of the eucharist (Egan 1991).

The second half of the sixteenth century in Spain saw the rise of the Reformed branch of the Carmelite order under the leadership of Teresa de Jesús (1515–82), beginning at Avila (Williams 1991). After some twenty years as a mediocre nun Teresa experienced a conversion to a deep mystical life about 1554 and began receiving a succession of mystical gifts she later recounted in her *Life*, one of the most read of mystical classics (written 1562–5). In this work Teresa saw ecstatic rapture as the goal of the mystical path, but her later experience as a religious founder and guide of souls led her to change her views. In her most mature work, *The Interior Castle* (1577), she sketched a seven-stage

⁶ For general accounts of early modern Catholic mysticism, see Cognet (1966); and the essays in part I of Dupré and Saliers (1989). Also worth consulting is the brilliant, if controversial, interpretation of Michel de Certeau (1992, 2015).

mystical itinerary that ends with a life combining both action and contemplation, not unlike what was said of Ignatius. Teresa recruited the young Carmelite John of the Cross (1542–91) to the reform. Theologically well-educated and far more the pure contemplative, during his imprisonment by Carmelite enemies of the reform (1577–8) John wrote a series of striking lyrics about the love between God and the soul. He was later asked by nuns under his direction to explain the poems, so between 1579 and 1591 he worked on four prose commentaries that constitute a *summa* of his teaching, rightly viewed as one of the high points of mystical theology.⁷ The Spanish Carmelite mystical tradition continued on into the seventeenth century, and the works of Teresa and John in translation soon had a powerful effect throughout Catholic Europe. Spanish mysticism was not just the province of giants like Teresa and John. Their contemporary, the Augustinian Luis de León (c.1527–91), was the first editor of Teresa's works and a distinguished poet and mystic. Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits also produced mystical authors.

At the end of the sixteenth century the centre of Catholic power moved from Habsburg Spain to Bourbon France, and another great age of early modern Catholic mysticism appeared.⁸ In the 1590s the noblewoman Barbe Acarie, influenced by the writings of Teresa, encouraged the spread of the Carmelites into France and gathered a mystical discussion group around her. This group included Capuchins interested in mysticism and the Savoyard nobleman Francis de Sales (1567–1622). Ordained priest and then bishop, Francis was the great representative of 'Devout Humanism', a view stressing God's universal love, free will even after the Fall, and the call to a life of devotion culminating in mystical union with God. Francis wrote two popular spiritual classics: *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (1607), setting out a programme of spirituality open to all walks of life; and *The Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), analysing mystical union. Contemporary with Francis, and also a member of the Acarie group, was Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), the founder of the French Oratory. Bérulle's mystical writings, such as *The Discourse on the States and Grandeurs of Jesus*, established what has been called the 'French School' of mysticism, which included such authors as Jean-Jacques Olier (d. 1657) and Jean Eudes (d. 1680). Seventeenth-century France witnessed an outpouring of mystical literature among the religious orders, especially the Jesuits (e.g. Jean-Joseph Surin, d. 1675), the Carmelites (e.g. Jean de Saint-Samson, d. 1636; and Lawrence of the Resurrection, d. 1691), as well as the Ursuline mystic and missionary to Canada, Marie de l'Incarnation (d. 1672).⁹

Nevertheless, all was not well with Catholic mysticism in the seventeenth century. The suspicions of mystical teaching that had been growing since the thirteenth century and that were abetted by the increasing rigidity of Catholicism in the era of the Counter-Reformation reached a boiling point in the last quarter of the century in the

⁷ John's four works are: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* (really two parts of one work); *The Spiritual Canticle*; and *The Living Flame of Love*. For a study comparing Teresa and John, see Howells (2002).

⁸ This is not to suggest that there were no other Catholic mystics in Europe at this time, as figures like Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi (d. 1607) and Isabella Bellinzaga (d. 1624) in Italy, and Angelus Silesius (d. 1677) in Germany demonstrate.

⁹ A classic account of seventeenth-century French spirituality and mysticism is Henri Bremond's 11-vol. history (Bremond 1915–33).

Quietist Controversy. Mystical teachers in Spain, Italy, and France came under attack, accused of such errors as: (1) claiming that their own enlightenment trumped external forms of religion; (2) that their interior surrender to a prayer of quiet absolved them of external practices, and possibly even of the obligation to resist temptation to sin; and finally, (3) that they could attain a state of love so pure they no longer even needed to care about salvation. A Spanish priest resident in Rome, Miguel de Molinos (1628–97), wrote a popular *Spiritual Guide* (*Guia spiritual*) in 1675. It soon became a best-seller, but was attacked by Italian Jesuits and others, despite its frequent citation of received authorities like Teresa, John of the Cross, and Francis de Sales. Molinos was arrested by the Inquisition, and in 1687 confessed his errors and was sentenced to life imprisonment. In the same year Innocent XI issued a condemnation of sixty-eight heretical errors from Molinos's writings, letters, and accounts of his spiritual direction, few of which are to be found in the *Spiritual Guide*. Thus began the war on 'Quietist' mystics in Italy and in Spain.

The arena of combat soon shifted to France. The laywoman Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717) experienced a conversion to the mystical life in 1669. She wrote an extensive commentary on the whole Bible (1682–4), began a series of apostolic preaching tours, and produced a series of popular mystical treatises, such as the *Short and Easy Method of Prayer*. She and her confessor were arrested in 1687 and accused of errors similar to those of Molinos. Freed through the influence of friends at court, for the next few years Guyon moved in court circles and acquired many supporters, including the royal tutor, Archbishop François Fénelon (1651–1715). Court intrigues led to the loss of her support, however, and at the instigation of her main opponent, the powerful bishop of Meaux, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (d. 1704), she was investigated by a group of bishops at Issy and compelled to ascribe to thirty-four articles asserting Catholic faith in disputed mystical matters. She did sign, as did Fénelon, but Bossuet accused her of bad faith and had her arrested for continuing to propagate her views. Fénelon came to her defence in his major mystical work, *The Maxims of the Saints* (1697), and a war of treatises ensued. Under pressure from Louis XIV, Bossuet, and their supporters, in 1699 Innocent XII issued a mild condemnation of twenty-three articles drawn from *The Maxims*. Fénelon gave in and left the court, Guyon remained under house arrest for years, and in France, as in Italy and Spain, anyone suspected of mystical error lost influence, position, and sometimes their freedom. The war against mystical theology seemed to have achieved complete success.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has been designed to be a kind of broad road map of the development of Christian mystical theology down to the Quietist Controversy and the triumph of the Enlightenment that took a decidedly negative view of mysticism as irrational fanaticism. Mysticism, of course, did not totally die out after 1700, though it often had to go underground, or appear in some bizarre manifestations over the next two centuries.

The revival of interest in the properly *theological* aspect of the mystical element of Christianity that this volume witnesses to allows us to return to these genealogies, not to repeat them, but to learn from them for what may lie ahead in the story of Christian mysticism.

SUGGESTED READING

de Certeau (1992, 2015); Hollywood and Beckman (2012); Lamm (2013); McGinn (1991–); McIntosh (1998).

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CHAPTER 5

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

MARIA CLARA LUCCHETTI BINGEMER

It is undeniable that mystical studies have returned to academia and to theological debate. For some time regarded with suspicion and distrust as alienating and merely private, mystical experience—perhaps one of the most profound human experiences—is today an object of research and study in various fields of knowledge: theology and religious studies, philosophy of religion, literature, anthropology, psychology, even neurobiology, by believers and non-believers from all backgrounds and within varied institutional frameworks.

In this chapter, I shall examine the presence and visibility of spiritual and mystical experience in the secularized and plural contemporary world, especially the so-called ‘godless’ twentieth century (cf. Bingemer 2013). In doing so, I hope to offer readers an accurate picture of mysticism in our world, in which the prevalence of mystical experience is better understood. To accomplish this, I shall first set the question in the socio-political and cultural context of the contemporary world. Second, I shall highlight the characteristics of contemporary mystical experience as distinct from historical understandings. Finally, I shall trace the contours of present-day mystical experience in the southern hemisphere, where the experience of the Spirit is intertwined in distinctive ways with issues such as secular politics or interreligious dialogue (cf. Santos and Meneses 2010; Susin 2016), and with the emergence of intra-ecclesial spiritualism. I shall elaborate the new challenges that the experience of and reflection upon such a mysticism poses for Christian theology and its discourse about humanity.

A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

My hypothesis is that, in a secular era, in which the traces of God are almost invisible and in which the different religions seem to take a somewhat ‘vague’ form, mystical

experiences still occur, strongly and unexpectedly, but with different syntheses in relation to previous periods (see Hervieu-Léger 1993; Libanio 2002).

Mystics are no longer found mainly in cloisters or religious orders. They can be found in factories, amid the noisy and stressful rhythm of machines and industry; in the streets with those who are poor and excluded from progress; or in prisons, and even in the hell of the 'lagers' and 'gulags'. Due to their activity and commitment, they may be regarded as dangerous by the established authorities. I affirm that they are mystics according to the evidence of a radical experience of God's love, which inspires and drives them.

One of the characteristics of mysticism in the contemporary world is the existence of a sensitivity which seeks a direct and immediate experience of the mystery of ultimate Reality. This search for immediate experience no longer presents clear institutional contours, but rather points toward a trans-religious tendency that the desired contact takes place with the deepest core, the ultimate secret of reality, which I will call God and which religious scholars identify as the common denominator, the core of all religions (Duquoc 2002).

The mysticism of our time does not wait for the reform of churches or religious institutions to effect its own search. Nor does it seek the blessing of academia. Our contemporaries cross-connect vocabularies, concepts, and symbols of very different origins to affirm their search for God without asking for permission from academic or ecclesiastical representatives (see Mardones 2005).

Since this mysticism occurs independently from ecclesiastic or religious institutions, it finds other affiliations and allegiances. One of them is the indissoluble connection with ethics and all that derives from it, namely: transformative action in the world, presence in the public space, political commitment, care for creation, dialogue with science and with other religious experiences, and alliance with the conflicting and suffering world. This is partly a just reaction to the privatizing, subjectivist tendency which has long marked mysticism, divorcing it even from theology itself (cf. Balthasar 2001).

If mysticism is union with divine mystery, this divinity is certainly not found 'outside' the things of the world. For if God may be found in all things, if it is possible to experience his ineffable presence in the world as it is, then the profane and the secular are opportunities to experience God, not abdicating or escaping the world of secularity.

Similarly, mystical thinking values not only reason, but also and especially experiences and emotions. Mystics of all sorts, throughout history and across cultures, are passionate about God. The divine enters their lives with the power and violence of a tremendous passion and takes them completely, subduing them with the imperative of their love. In their relationships with God they experience joy and pain, absence and presence, each in their own original style. However, all of them, with no exception, feel certain that they are dealing with the most profound and holy mystery, with the One whom religions seek to name, but who nevertheless escapes every human attempt to circumscribe or grasp.

Theology may draw from narratives of the experiences of mystics of all times and places to better know the God of their faith. For although these 'God lovers' are not and do not claim to be academic theologians, it is undeniable that in their writings there is much of theology, in the strictest and fullest sense of the word. It is evident that mysticism

today reveals a desire for communion with everything human, especially pain and suffering. In theology, the experience of God is often spoken of as preceded by passion, in both senses of the word: ardour for the divine—which may also manifest itself as superabundant love for the world and for others—and the experience of suffering. The question of God and the hunger for his presence may emerge in the depths of human beings from the pain caused by the injustice of the world and by the helplessness of suffering. It is ‘the history of the passion of the world which is ultimately also God’s passion and his grace, which originates the passion for God’ (Metz 1998).

The experience and perception of pain in and of the world take us beyond the argument between theism and atheism. Human suffering calls into question the possibility of believing in the existence of an almighty, omnibenevolent God who ‘rules all things magnificently’. A faith which seeks to justify rather than protest the suffering of the world is inhumane. Indignation, the wrath that clamours, the voice that rises, must bear witness to the longing of the ‘entirely Other’ (see recent discussions by Habermas 2010; and Eagleton 2010). As Max Horkheimer says, it is ‘the longing that the murderer should not triumph over the innocent victim’ (Horkheimer 2003). Without passion for justice in the world, and for the one who is ultimately its guarantor, there can be no conscious desire to take on upon oneself the suffering caused by injustice. This voluntary suffering is fruitful, since it gives rise to the prophetic and mystical vocations that embrace and take upon themselves the suffering of victims in their defence (cf. Day 1959: 78; Hillesum 2008).

Mystical experiences of and reflection upon human suffering transform human ideas about the world. The world as it *really* is can no longer be defined as a mirror of divinity; the mirror is broken. In light of the reality of suffering, defining the world in terms of its perfection or harmony seems idolatrous. In practice, this means that if human beings are no longer asking absolute questions about justice and ultimate meaning, they will become accustomed to the imperfection of their circumstances.

Critical theology and critical atheism coincide in seeking and finding in injustice, in human suffering, and in the unbearable situation of the world, the mark of the claim for the ultimate meaning of life as justice. In this sense, critical believers and critical atheists meet in their struggle for justice and peace, with or without religious sanction, envisaging practical solidarity as the only way. Through practical solidarity, contemporary mystics stand out as those who choose not to escape suffering, nor deal with it from a place of comfort. Instead, not wanting to be separated from the pain that affects their fellow human beings, they engage suffering as sufferers so that by suffering with and like others, they can testify to the meaning of human life revealed to them in that suffering, both physical and in the depths of their souls (see Tracy 2003: 242).

If we turn our gaze more specifically to Christianity and Christian mysticism, the definition of God as love puts yet another seal on the mystical identity. Love leaves those who love exposed before an absence of absolute certainties, walking between being and non-being, between words and silence, between presence and absence (see Marion 2002a, 2002b, 2007). In the experience of love, those who love receive a new being that is given them by the object of love. That is, the power of love is limited to the

event of love itself. From this comes its supreme power but also its vulnerability and impotence. Love cannot impose itself and make itself credible except with and as love. Faced with active evil and the injustice that mutilates and attacks, it cannot retaliate in kind. It can only suffer and sympathize. Through this goes the path of mystical experience, which in our secular contemporary world tries to answer the question: 'How to speak of God after Auschwitz? How to love God in a godless world?'

CHRISTIAN AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

Contemporary mysticism, with its aspects of indissoluble alliance with ethics and practice, of non-institutional culture, of trans-denominationalism, and of interreligious transit, brings, therefore, profound interpellations into theology. The relationship between mysticism and theology, with its bi-directionality, constitutes a critical point of reflection in understanding mysticism today.

A historical retrospective of the interplay between theology and mysticism would indicate the extent and variety of forms that this relationship has taken in different times, traditions, and schools (von Hügel 1908; Poulain 1912). It is impossible to explain here all the intricacies of this complex history. However, one thing is certain: theology and mysticism must go together. Regarding mysticism as somehow foreign to theology indicates a myopic theological gaze that can no longer see the font in which theology itself has been baptized since the early centuries of Christianity (in the fourth century, Athanasius and Basil decided to use the term 'theology', until then regarded with suspicion or repressed by Christian writers due to its use by the pagans).

Christian theology emerged as the hermeneutics of the holiness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, manifested in humanity. The seemingly abstract reasoning of Trinitarian, Christological, and pneumatological speculations in the early centuries that constitute the central synthesis of Christian faith did not seek anything but to strongly affirm the reality of human salvation and sanctification, realized by the self-communication of God. Theology, in this sense, was born to serve the mystagogical experience (see Vázquez Moro 1999; Mazza 1989; Cronin 2012).

Christian theology does not take place without the anthropological experience we call 'mystical' or 'spiritual'. In addition, the unique root of that mystical, 'spiritual' experience is first the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not oppose the world, however, but enlivens it. What characterizes Christian mysticism is not immaterial sublimity, but sanctification of and in the flesh. The Spirit does not escape the world, but descends into reality to sanctify it. The one who, per Augustine, is called 'Gift', manifests its power in the capacity it offers the believers to follow Jesus, going out of themselves in order to dedicate themselves to others (see Vázquez Moro 2016).

It is in this sense that mystical experience cannot be separated, with regard to its form, from ethical experience. This connection came into relief in the doubts that many Protestant scholars, including Albert Schweitzer, had about Catholic mysticism

(see McGinn 2004: 265–343). Nearly a century later, this appears ever more clearly. Its intentions aim at love, goodness, and justice, and not primarily at beauty or truth. This is not because these are in fact secondary, but because in the human being they come via love, which is, inseparably, love for God and love for neighbours. The Christian mystical experience is, thus, an experience that is simultaneously ‘exodal’ and ‘ecstatic’. The ecstasy which constitutes it is precisely an exodus. Mystics in their writings have attached little value to extraordinary phenomena—visions, bilocations, abductions, and ecstasies of all kinds—or at least, never at the expense of the charitable works which follow from them (Guitton 1993). This exodus is also a paschal experience.

That is why mysticism, for theology, is not only the content of a field of research. It is rather a way for theology to be Christian. It is the way for theological content to avoid becoming ideological content that is unrelated to human experience and the experience of charity and goodness. The necessary relation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, promoted by German theologian Johann Baptist Metz in the 1970s and, in Latin America, by liberation theology, is not simply an imperative coming from what our age might regard as politically correct (see Metz 1980, 1995, 1998; Metz and Moltmann 1995). It is the expression of the condition of being Christian. In this sense, today more than ever, perhaps, mysticism and testimony cannot be separated. They are indissolubly and constitutively united. The mystery of Christ has always been proven through the fragility of its witnesses. Those, in turn, who mystically experience God confess it because they rely on the support of the testimony of the Comforter Spirit (John 15: 26) (cf. Bingemer and Casarella 2015).

The testimonial nature of Christianity prevents theology from moving away from mysticism and spirituality. When this moving away takes place, theology dries out and disfigures its own identity, which is otherwise found as the lively and joyful actuality of the Good News, not satisfied with historiography, the archaeology of texts, or the multidisciplinary analysis of religious phenomena. That is why mysticism and the theology emerging from it are constantly challenged by the world and reality, as is evident in recent history of the churches and Christian people.

A MYSTICISM OF EARTHLY REALITIES

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Second Vatican Council, in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), advocated an ‘autonomy of earthly realities’ which is not incompatible with faith and the practice of religion (GS 36). Although this paragraph approaches the subject more from the perspective of the conversation between science and faith, I believe it is not illegitimate to apply it to mysticism in contemporary times. Immediate contact with the divine mystery amidst earthly, contingent reality leads mystics to reflect, witness, act and/or transform their surroundings in dialogue with politics, science, intellectual life, and in solidarity with the marginalized or oppressed. To demonstrate how this has been manifest in the developed and secularized context of the

twentieth century, I shall explore several examples: Etty Hillesum, Simone Weil, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, and Christian de Chergé.

The greatest genocide in human history—the Shoah—was the setting for a striking number of mystical experiences, including those of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Titus Brandsma, Alfred Delp, and many others. Here I shall discuss Etty Hillesum, a well-educated and attractive 29-year-old Dutch Jewish woman who lived a rather sheltered life, seemingly oblivious while the Nazi horror grew all around her (Hillesum 1941–3, 1987, 1996, 2002). Falling in love with a Jungian psychologist, she followed his advice, and opened her mind to prayer. What followed was a torrent of mystical grace that led her towards an inner life of profound contemplation.

The fruit of her intense mystical life led the young Etty to great ethical and political sacrifice. At the time that the Nazi ‘final solution’ was revealing itself as violent and calamitous, she had the opportunity to escape and take refuge outside the occupied zone. Instead, she voluntarily remained at Westerbork concentration camp, aiding those prisoners being passed through, to ‘help God and be a balm on the wounds of his people’ (letter dated 11 July 1942). There she lived and worked in the final months of her life, keeping in constant and profound dialogue with God, until being deported with her entire family to Auschwitz, where she died in a gas chamber in 1943, at age 29.

Etty’s most significant insight belongs to the vulnerability of divine life (diaries 1942–3; Hillesum 1996). However, she felt the fragility of God as loving protection. The more her future fell under the whims of the Nazis, the more protected she felt, writing, ‘I don’t feel in anyone’s clutches, I feel only in the arms of God’ (Hillesum 1996: 677). Her diaries, published posthumously, are among the most eloquent testimonies of the horrors of war and the need to forgive and not to hate even one’s enemies, saying in one entry: ‘If there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people’ (Hillesum 1996: 25).

Simone Weil, another Jewish mystic who lived during the war, is also worthy of attention (see Pétrement 1976; Pétrement 2012; Bingemer 2015). Weil was a French philosopher of merit and intellectual brilliance. Early in her life, she combined her work as a teacher with political participation. Her desire to participate in the struggles of the poor of her time led her to spend a year working in a factory, which, according to her, killed her youth and forever marked her with the red-hot iron of slavery (Bingemer 2010). Her encounter with Christianity culminated in a mystical experience in which she felt that Christ himself had come and taken possession of her. ‘It was during one of these recitations (of the poem “Love” by George Herbert) that... Christ himself came down and took possession of me’ (Weil 1952: 44–5). This mystical experience is strongly marked by a sense of participation in the Passion of Christ, which shaped the last days of her short life, and in relation to which she admitted to ‘commit[ting] the sin of envy’ (Weil 2000: 125). Nevertheless, she did not accept baptism, so as not to be separated from the truth she saw in other religions. Weil lived her last years in London, suffering in her desire to return to France and work for the Resistance. As French authorities did not

allow this, she began to eat only the same as the French in the occupied zone. Becoming gradually weaker, she finally died from tuberculosis.

Weil's collected works comprise nineteen volumes. Alongside her political and philosophical texts, she left mystical writings that are highly illuminating to those struggling today against the difficulty in reconciling their desire for God and their belonging to a church. Her thought, as much as her life, can be seen a precursor to the liberation movements that emerged in the 1960s: for example, to the movement of worker-priests, in France, to Catholic Action, which increased secular militancy and, a little later, to liberation theology in Latin America. Her reflections about misfortune (or affliction, *malheur*) are a rich and fertile soil, which intimate the option for the poor and the mysticism of incarnation, especially in the poorest regions of the planet. She considered holiness the greatest need of the modern world, but not simply a holiness of following traditions of the past. Rather, Weil conceived of a holiness full of genius to meet the challenges of the contemporary age. 'Today,' she writes, 'it is not enough to be a saint; it is necessary to have the sanctity demanded by the moment; a new holiness, without precedent' (Weil 1952: 81; my tr.). For her, the saints would never set themselves apart from what their contemporaries suffered.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century emerges the luminous figure of the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A scientist and precursor of creation mysticism, material experience was for him essential as a condition and a way to access the divine milieu. He vigorously affirmed: 'Son of earth, steep yourself in the sea of matter, bathe in its fiery waters, for it is the source of your life and your youthfulness' (de Chardin 1965: 60). His great maxim was to make our way to heaven through earth. His life was devoted to the defence of this vital mysticism, in a permanent struggle against unearthly and rootless spiritualism. He understood that true human understanding goes through 'solidarity with the earth'. He passionately embraced the experience of the Real, with all the richness of its materiality. He said in a letter to his friend, Leontine Zanta, in October 1926: 'It seems that Humanity will no longer fall in love with God before He is shown to them at the end of a movement which prolongs our cult of the concrete Real, instead of plucking us out of it' (de Chardin 1967: 91; cf. de Chardin 1969: 72). His entire life was shaped by two great loves: the world and God. He was unable to envision any way to access God but through passionate faith in the world. In it he glimpsed the touch of God's diaphaneity: 'Rich with the sap of the world, I rise up towards the Spirit whose vesture is the magnificence of the material universe but who smiles at me from far beyond all victories' (de Chardin 1965: 20). During his life, Teilhard faced great resistance from the Church against his research and publications. He struggled continually to navigate between obedience to his superiors and the science to which he dedicated himself. His discoveries, which he could not deny without lying to himself and to the truth he rigorously pursued, unveiled new horizons that were not well assimilated by the hierarchy of the Church. Today, his works are an inspiration for any dialogue between faith and science.

Thomas Merton left an early life of licentiousness for a monastic calling, and became one of the most important mystics of the twentieth century. While undisputedly having

been a contemplative at heart for many years, in March 1958, 'in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut' he received an enlightening grace, and was 'suddenly overwhelmed with the realization' of his love for his fellow persons, and their mutual relation and connection one to another, despite being total strangers (Merton 1965: 153–4). This experience, among others, led him see his monastic vocation as inseparable from his facing the problems of the world and participating in any historical moment. He intensified his work as a writer and because of his prodigious output and the sensibility with which he reached out to the world, we continue to enjoy the depth and literary genius of his works.

Merton's contemplative vocation was lived out at the height of secularity and amidst global turmoil, such as the Cold War and the nuclear threat. Merton wrote against the many wars in which his country of origin, the United States, participated, speaking out with courage against all threats to peace. One of the emerging concerns of the twentieth century which attracted Merton and about which he spoke with prophetic voice was ecology, specifically humankind's predatory relationship with the planet:

Obedient to the point of death...perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian in technological society toward God's creation and God's will for His creation. Obedience to God's will for nature and for man—respect for nature and love for man—in the awareness of our power to frustrate God's designs for nature and for man—to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste. (Merton, as quoted in Butigan 1984: 52ff.)

Merton felt awe and amazement before the greatness of the universe, which prompted him to regard nature with caring adoration (Merton 1997: 258, 321, 324–5). It is thus no surprise that attention to creation is a constitutive part of his mysticism. There is a true spousal mystery in his contact with nature, and he does not hesitate to use nuptial language to express himself:

the silence of the forest is my bride and the sweet dark warmth of the whole world is my love, and out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world. (Merton 1997: 240)

The ecological consciousness aroused in this erotic, passionate love for creation seems a precursor to the one we see growing today in society and in the Church (for example, see the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, issued 2015, which collects magisterial thought on ecological consciousness, and proposes a mysticism of which Merton is a pioneer).

Finally, Merton was a pioneer in interreligious dialogue, with Buddhism in particular. In the late 1950s through the 1960s, Merton engaged in correspondence with the Dalai Lama, the Japanese writer D. T. Suzuki, and the monks Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Thich Nhat Hanh. In 1968, he travelled to Asia with the intention of dialoguing with Eastern monasticism. He died in Bangkok at the age of 53.

For a powerful example of engagement in interreligious dialogue, we turn to the more contemporary Christian de Chergé, who lived at the end of the twentieth century (see Salenson 2012 and Kiser 2003). Inspired by the courage of a Muslim man who saved his life during the Algerian wars, de Chergé became a Trappist monk, entering the novitiate in a monastery in Algeria. There, he felt his vocation was to be among the Muslims as a brother in faith, creating a praying community according to the ideal of the ‘communion of saints’. Writing to a friend, he said:

The calling I feel has made me want to be a stranger who no longer has a home on this earth in order to go there where God intends. But this same calling has consecrated me to live a vow of stability in this monastery, to be a living embodiment with all the inhabitants of this country, this City of God where all the frontiers of country, race, and religion should one day disappear. (de Chergé, as quoted in Kiser 2003: 49)

Elected prior, he created groups of prayer and reflection of Christians and Muslims; he practised the fasting of Ramadan and opened the monastery to Islamists for praying. Notre Dame de l’Atlas was in a poor community with which the monks lived in close and fraternal friendship. When a great wave of violence erupted in the country, the community thought about whether to flee or remain. After prayerful consideration, they decided to stay, due to the vow of stability of their monastic profession and in solidarity with the community they served. After a period of tribulation, the monks were finally kidnapped and killed. (The young monk Christophe Lebreton, a master of novices and poet, said that the community was living in ‘epiclesis,’ as quoted in Olivera 1997: 55.) Christian de Chergé left a testament, which is perhaps the most important spiritual text of the twentieth century, in which he forgave in advance his murderers and expressed the desire to be with them in their encounter with the Father (de Chergé 1996).

These five examples show us the mysticism experienced amidst the secularism and religious plurality of the northern hemisphere. Experiencing union with God, all men and women mentioned here responded to the great problems and issues of life in the world, paying the price of embracing with others the great causes of the contemporary world. This did not stop them from being in profound communion with God, in prayer and contemplation—rather, in many cases their lived solidarity with others enabled this communion. Meanwhile, mystics from the south experienced other kinds of calls and were faced with different challenges (cf. de Sousa Santos 2011).

MYSTICISM, INCARNATION, AND THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

From 1968 onwards, with the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia, the Church of Latin America began to make important changes in its configuration and pastoral strategy. The most important of these changes was the

focus on the well-being of the region's poor. This 'preferential option for the poor' would map the way forward for the Latin American Church and become the core of a new theological movement: liberation theology (Bingemer 2016).

The crux of this movement does not reside—as it is often erroneously thought—in an option for Marxism, but in the mysticism of the encounter with the Lord in the face of the poor (see especially chapter 10, 'Encountering God in History', in Gutiérrez 1971). From this movement emerged new ecclesial communities formed by people living on the margins. In turn, new prophetic and mystical vocations appeared that facilitated a new and radical experience of immediate and loving union with God, questioned by society, but bearing fruit in practical life. Perhaps the theologian who best describes this Latin American mysticism is Jon Sobrino, who elaborates on the profile of a political holiness (Sobrino 1983). He does not actually use the term 'mysticism' but 'holiness' (*santidad*). In my view, in his work these terms are interchangeable.

According to Sobrino, mysticism always presupposes openness and obedience to God's will, individually felt and experienced. In a context of poverty, oppression, and injustice, the primary will of God is that the poor majorities live (Sobrino 1983). By its being mystical, this experience cannot be other than an experience of transformational love. However, the experience never remains personal, but transcends it, reaching into the political realm.

Mysticism so conceived necessarily includes the 'entrails of mercy' (Luke 1: 78) and implies a clear-eyed vision of the immense unjust pain of the oppressed majorities. In addition, it requires some efficacious action. This is love, political love, in proportion to the death which one wants to eradicate and to the way of life intended for the poor. A love directed not to specific individuals, but to a collective: the poor majorities whose situation one intends to transform. The mysticism of liberation wants not only to assist the poor, but also to share their living conditions, to dwell alongside them and live as they live, to help them be the true artisans of their own liberation (see Sobrino 2007: 291; Gutiérrez 1980).

Political love requires a specific asceticism—made of kenosis and dispossession while one heads towards the world of poverty and of the poor—and the courage to denounce the injustices and to withstand the persecutions that come to those who sympathize with the poor. Remaining in mystical love even as one is persecuted testifies to faith in a fundamental love, exercised in remarkable Christian fortitude that may result even in martyrdom, as Archbishop Romero once said about a murdered priest:

The great numbers of these deaths is what not only enables us to speak a priori of the possibility of political holiness, but what forces us to speak of it a posteriori. If the spilt blood of so many bishops, priests, nuns, catechists, teachers, and also of Christians who are peasants, workers, trade unionists, and combatants, is not a convincing argument that the political is a proper sphere for holiness, and moreover that at the moment holiness normally means involvement with politics, then there is no theological discourse that could be convincing. Those who are not convinced, even by the clearest examples, are unable to interpret Jesus' death as the death of the Just One. They would be left with the alternative of interpreting his death as that of a blasphemer and subversive, as the powers of his time wanted it to be understood.

(Quoted in Sobrino 1983; my tr.)

This political mysticism bears witness to the holiness and justice of God in his incarnational form: God as Holy Mystery who descends and renounces himself to carry out human salvation. The symmetry is forever broken and God, although he loves everyone, has a preference—a preferential love—for the poor and the oppressed (Muñoz 1993: 9–11). After Jesus, this is the true Christian mysticism: salvifically to approach the poor and share their destiny on the cross of Jesus (cf. Sobrino 1983). Some Latin American mystics fully embody this ideal of political mysticism.

Ignacio Ellacuría

Ignacio Ellacuría and the entire Jesuit community of the Universidad José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in El Salvador were murdered by a paramilitary group in 1989 (Whitfield 1995). The project of the university, in which the Basque Jesuit was rector, was entirely devoted to the country's poor. Ellacuría was a famous philosopher and had great influence on Salvadoran political life, publicly speaking out against the violence and brutality that claimed many lives among the poorest.

'In Ellacuría, one encounters a liberation theologian writing about human salvation in history without collapsing the divine into the human realm' (Lee 2003: 228). According to him, salvation is fulfilled historically, not only individually but also collectively. It should not be understood only as liberation from evil, guilt, personal or social harm, pain, disease, or fetishism. These forms of liberation only begin after liberation from unjust structures such as slavery, political domination, and psychological and social oppression. What makes Ellacuría's case paradigmatic is the fact that he was the president of a university who, from that 'locus', tried to do something which would appeal to the entire globe, north and/or south, and questioned all pastoral activity of the Church.

Ellacuría's thinking—Jon Sobrino writes—derived from a variety of sources, the greatest though perhaps least noticed of which is the 'the biblical-Jesuanic tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola and of Monsignor Romero' (Sobrino 2008: 1). The mysticism of Ellacuría and of the UCA community can be summarized in three points, according to Jon Sobrino (see Sobrino 2010): the first is the question of the crucified people, which must be taken down from the cross, knowing that by doing so one may end up on the cross. The second is the challenge of working for a civilization of poverty, which opposes and overcomes the civilization of wealth, responsible for the serious infirmity of the prevailing civilization. The third point is his affirmation that 'with Monsignor Romero, God passed through El Salvador', which points to something ultimate and beneficial, which makes itself present in the history of the defenders of the victims (Sobrino 2010: 70).

Martyrdom marked the life and mind of Ellacuría and his entire community, giving them a special light. We must not forget why Ellacuría lived, thought, and died, nor why he led a project and a community that would be an unforgettable testimony for the whole world.

Ernesto Cardenal

In the Latin American context, the Nicaraguan Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal (b. 1925) has always been identified as the poet of social inclusion, a revolutionary activist linked by strong bonds to liberation theology. In June 1956, Cardenal experienced a profound mystical ecstasy, which he associated with the experience of conversion, and which completely transformed him. After this ecstasy, he made the decision to enter the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane, Kentucky. There, he experienced a fine-tuning between contemplative and active life. From 1957 to 1959, under the guidance of Thomas Merton, his novice master, he realized that spiritual life is profoundly linked to human interests and in harmony with time.

However, discussions of Cardenal's work and legacy have seldom emphasized his spiritual profile. A notable exception is Thomas Merton's prologue for Cardenal's book, *Vida en el Amor* (1970), which recounts that the Nicaraguan novice was already a spiritual 'master', woven with the 'sign of wisdom and the humility of love' (Texeira 2016). This same year, Cardenal's dream of an alternative contemplative community was fulfilled in the archipelago of Solentiname. In it he created, in 1966, a monastic community. The project aimed at a different spiritual presence, with active involvement with the poor community. This rich experience was partly described in the book *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (1975), composed from evangelical comments at Sunday masses, written by participants of the community. The work gained international prominence. With the advance of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process, the Solentiname community became more and more identified and committed to the Sandinista movement, and ultimately became totally involved with it. With the victory of the Sandinista revolution in 1979, Cardenal accepted the invitation to join the government as minister of culture. Thus, in Latin America, he became known less for his spirituality and more for his militant psalms, for the unique *El Evangelio en Solentiname* of 1975, and for his activity in the Sandinista movement and public presence in government.

His time in government interrupted his literary activity for a period and contributed to his being defrocked by Pope John Paul II in 1984, a decision that was only reversed in 2014 by Pope Francis. In 1987, however, Cardenal left his government work and his literary activity was resumed. In 1994, he left the Sandinista movement and founded a renovation movement (Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista), as well as the 'House of the Three Worlds' (Casa de los Tres Mundos), a cultural institution of which he is now honorary president.

Pedro Casaldáliga

Coming from Catalonia as a young Claretian priest, Pedro Casaldáliga arrived in Brazil in 1968, in the region of Araguaia in the state of Mato Grosso. He faced the reality of extreme poverty, in which children died like flies and landowners oppressed the poor

(as told in Casaldáliga 1989a, 1990). Having received a traditional education, his missionary sensibility led him to fully engage the problems of the region, radically opting for the poor.

In addition to speaking out against injustice and in favour of the oppressed majorities, he has lived a life of intense mysticism together with the people of Araguaia with whom he shared everything, including housing and food. When he was named bishop, he adopted the motto of his pastoral community: *Own nothing, carry nothing, ask nothing, silence nothing and, above all, kill nothing*. He always refused to carry ornaments and rings, living in a small house, shared with other pastoral agents.

His mysticism is entirely focused on following Jesus and radically experiencing the Gospel. It is equally expressed in speeches, articles, and, above all, in poems, such as his short verse, 'And the Word Becomes Class' (Casaldáliga 2006: 43), which reveals his own dialogue between mysticism and politics, the hinge of his lifestyle. We see this elsewhere, as in his poem 'God is God' (Casaldáliga 1989b) which ponders the mystery of the relationship between beauty, justice, joy, and truth as wrought and experienced by unbelievers and as wrought and experienced by the faithful. In spite of numerous death threats over the years, and while battling Parkinson's disease into old age, Pedro Casaldáliga continues writing, giving interviews, and denouncing injustice wherever he sees it.

Oscar Arnulfo Romero

As a man of his time, Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero was shaped by the traditional and pre-conciliar education he received as a seminarian and priest. There, experience of religious faith and practice were conceived as somewhat detached from the daily lives of real people. He was a man of faith and prayer, a devoted pastor, but at this stage he did not give a great deal of attention to historical reality as the privileged 'locus' and primary source from which God spoke.

His second conversion occurred after his appointment as bishop, after he witnessed the murder of Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande. Then, he was able to feel in a new way the extreme poverty of his people and the violence of the powerful who—like in many other countries in the continent—killed or enforced the disappearance of leaders, peasants, priests, pastoral agents, and many others who spoke out in defence of the oppressed. (I refer here to the bloody right-wing dictatorships that had their apex in the 1970s and 1980s in the continent.) The fundamental theme of his teachings was the Church and its saving relationship with the people, taking very seriously the historical reality of those years. In response, he urged his faithful to come together:

A religion of Sunday mass but unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A Church that sets itself up to have lots of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest at injustices would not be the true church of our divine Redeemer.

(Romero, Homily for 4 December 1977)

He regarded his priestly office in this way:

the pastor must be where there is suffering; so I came, as I went to all places where there is pain and death, to take the word of consolation to those who suffer... For the Church there are no different categories. There is only suffering, and it has to be expressed in pain wherever it is found... I also wanted (my) word to be a word of repudiation of violence. When are we going to end this wave of blood?... and if they succeed in killing me, I pardon and bless those who may carry out the killing.

(Romero, Homily for 30 October 1977)

Two weeks before his death, in an interview to the newspaper *Excelsior* in Mexico, he said:

'I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. As a pastor, I am bound by a divine commitment to give my life for those whom I love, and that includes all Salvadorans, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe I have deserved. However, if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people, and as a witness of hope in what is to come... Jesus Christ helped the martyrs and, if need be, I will feel Him so very close when I will hand over my last breath to Him... Thus I agree to my consecration to the Heart of Jesus, who has always been a source of Christian inspiration and joy in my life. With faith do I accept my death no matter how difficult it may be. I do not wish to assign it an intention for the peace of my homeland and for the growth of our Church, because the heart of Christ will know how to give it the destiny he wants... For me it is enough to be happy and trustful, knowing with certainty that in Him are my life and my death; that despite my sins I have placed my trust in Him, and I will not remain confused; and others with greater wisdom and holiness will continue the work for the church and the homeland.

(Romero, interview in *Excelsior*, 25 March 1980)

There is not even a hint of pride, presumption, or immoderate fervour here. Only the profound humility of a mystic and witness who trusts that he will not be helpless. Here is a man who does not believe himself to be indispensable and trusts that others will take his legacy forward.

CONCLUSION: MYSTICISM AS REDEMPTION OF LIFE

After observing what mysticism looks like today, not only in the developed West, but also in the southern hemisphere among the disadvantaged majorities, I propose to draw

some conclusions on future perspectives for Christian mysticism in contemporary times. Two main challenges lay ahead of us. The first is the urgent need for lucid and vigorous criticism of the phenomenon, observable today in Christian churches, even historical ones, of the triumphant return of charismatic spiritualism. The most worrisome thing is its rapid growth precisely in the poorest countries of the world. According to Ulpiano Vázquez Moro,

Spiritualism is a malformation of spirituality, which makes it incapable of any relationship with theology. Multifaceted, in the entrails of every spiritualism there lies an aversion for the human condition; a despair which compels it to desert the reality of the world (and in the not very long term the reality of the Church) aiming for another condition. However, this eschatological yearning is not born of mercy, but of rejection. That is why this kind of spiritualism is not a mysticism or spirituality and neither is it able or seeking to articulate itself honestly with any living Christian theology. Even if it strategically wears the mask of orthodoxy, it is in fact essentially gnostic... Theological inarticulacy thus reveals the allergy of spiritualism to Christian mystagogy as it is received from tradition and the consequent need to invent supposedly effervescent liturgical 'revivals' where the *lex orandi* can no longer find the *lex credendi*. Its need of evasion makes it look for an escape... from any situation of commitment with another human being.

(Vázquez Moro 2016: 16–17; my tr.)

In the escape from the world and in the 'vertiginous fall' into oneself, remaining trapped in a perpetual and noisy exteriority that does not reveal inner depth or historical transformation, Christian spiritualism today seems radically different from mystical experience understood as the life in the Spirit. This life in the Spirit is an experience and expression of love, and commitment with the works of love. Therefore, it is at the same time a spiritual and ethical experience.

The second challenge is critical lucidity before the modern or post-modern culture in which we have to live (see Bingemer 2013: ch. 1). It may seem incredible—and in a way, it is—that in a culture in which we seek to leave transcendence out of daily life or reduce it to a consumer object, it is precisely mysticism that can contribute to recover the substance of human life in all its power. Therefore, the path for mysticism, especially Christian mysticism, today is the counter-cultural path where the humanization of human beings and the experience that gives meaning to their lives occurs, against the grain of the society in which they live and of what is conveyed by it as leading to happiness.

In a culture of pleasure and seductive sensations, mystical experience takes us out of ourselves, letting us be affected by others, their differences, their otherness, and their needs. This implies profound and radical detachment and rigorous asceticism, which involves embracing the pain of others and making it one's own, being a space in which pain can take shelter, as a balm on the wounds of those who suffer. Seduced by God, the mystic embarks, with no defences and irredeemably, towards an adventure in which the

availability to the other will lead them to the loss of themselves and communion with the pain of others, a pain accepted and suffered in his or her own flesh.

In a consumerist culture, happiness means to have and to possess, always more and more, quickly discarding everything that one owns—from objects to people—and increasing the volatility and speed of the frantic devouring of goods and values. In contrast, mystical experience proposes a culture of gift, surrender, and care for others, above all for those who are most helpless, unhappy, and abandoned. Instead of consuming, one makes oneself ready to be consumed for the good of others (see Cavanaugh 2008).

In a culture which proclaims ‘freedom’—enacted as an arrogant form of autonomy with no obligations whatsoever, guided according to one’s most immediate desires—as an ultimate value, mystical experience is a sign of contradiction: quintessentially receptive and passive, and above all conscious of its own impotence. As a theopathic experience, which embraces and receives what is given, suffering the presence and action of God, unable to do anything to produce it, mysticism praises humility and passivity, “non-acting action,” in Simone Weil’s words, the principal attitude of every human being.

In an unjust culture, where resources are distributed according to the selfish and totalitarian machinations of a few to the detriment of others; where the well-being of some is achieved via the progressive and systematic impoverishment of many, mystical experience teaches us to practise justice and to live according to its standards. Nevertheless, the mystical praxis of justice is made manifest not as retribution, but as an imitation of God himself, as restoration, giving others what they need in order to live and flourish. This restorative justice opposes the concept of retributive justice by seeking to ‘cure’ the consequences of crime, rather than to simply punish wrongdoing. For restorative justice to prevail, contemporary mystics are willing to pay the price with their own persons, exposing themselves and risking their lives for others to have abundant life. In a culture where injustice reigns, mystical experience teaches us not to wish to be on the side of society’s winners but on the side of the losers; not to seek the enjoyment of the advantages of progress while there are so many without access to these comforts. Mystical experience teaches us to have compassion for victims, sharing their condition and the consequences of the same injustice in solidarity.

In a culture in which violence reigns and kills many every day and every hour, mystical experience teaches us that the only place to be is with the victims, because to be elsewhere only strengthens the position of torturers and executioners. Their unity with the mystery of love gives mystics the strength to face violence while neither retaliating nor seeking vengeance. Rather, those who experience the powerful and loving presence of God overcome violence and take upon themselves its consequences, seeking thus to build a peace which is not simply the absence of war, but an active and redemptive love which restores and renews everything on the face of the earth.

In this chapter, I have focused on mysticism mostly within Christianity and its relation to Christian theology. Nevertheless, as I have affirmed, mystical experience in contemporary times does not occur only within institutions, religious or otherwise.

It occurs wherever men and women leave behind their very selves and transcend their personal limits to practise love and thereby transform the world through this same transcendence. Some of them live this exodus in their simple daily lives without visibility. Others enter public space, allowing themselves to be vulnerable and in some cases putting their own lives at risk.

Whether inside or outside religious institutions, whether radically committed to them or at the margins of their own frontiers, mystics teach us that the experience of the mystery of God in the world ignites in us a burning passion for this same world and to ceaselessly work for its redemption and transformation. Whatever their states of life, social statuses, or intellectual capacities, contemporary mystics retire to the bridal chamber in which the experience of love occurs in its fullness, and delight in plunging right into the disfigured reality of public, 'secular' space, seeking to shape it according to the mystery of God's love that they experience as a gift and grace.

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Bingemer and Casarella 2015; Gutiérrez 1971; McGinn 2004; Metz 1998; Sobrino 1988.

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PART II

SOURCES,
CONTEXTS, AND
PRACTICES

CHAPTER 6

LIVING THE WORD

KEVIN L. HUGHES

Both apostles run to the tomb. The tomb of Christ is divine Scripture, in which the mysteries of his divinity and humanity are secured by the weight of the letter, just as the tomb is secured by the stone.

(John Scotus Eriugena, *Homily on the Prologue of John* 3; Jeaneau 1969, 212)

IN his homily on the prologue to the Gospel of John, John Scotus Eriugena tells us that holy scripture is a tomb—an empty space that, as letters on a page, is as lifeless as the stone that secured it. But here, in the Gospel of John, the tomb is also a place of new life, of encounter, of hidden presence. Scholars have often noted the significant difference in the ‘empty tomb’ in the Johannine account. If the ‘synoptic’ tomb is simply empty—‘He has risen. He is not here . . . he is going before you to Galilee’ (Mark 16: 6–7)—John’s composition tells a different (and more dialectical) tale. The ‘two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet’ (John 20: 12) echo the two cherubim in the tabernacle (Exod. 25: 18–20), making plain that the tomb has become the Holy of Holies and the slab the Mercy Seat, the place of meeting between heaven and earth, between God and human. The tomb is empty; yet, like the empty space above the Mercy Seat, it is completely full of the invisible divine presence. Eriugena notes that ‘both apostles run, and both enter’. Peter, the figure of faith, enters first, and John, the figure of the intellect, enters after. ‘Therefore since it is written, “Unless you believe you will not understand,” faith necessarily enters first into the tomb of Holy Scripture; then intellect enters, following after. Faith has prepared the entry for it’ (Homily on the Prologue of John 3; Jeaneau 1969: 214). And it is here, he says, within the tomb, that we find ‘the mysteries of his divinity and humanity’—not only his divinity, but the very mystery of the person, God and man. Such an encounter is only possible when the stone of the letter has been rolled back and the entrance passed through. Only then do we ‘see and believe’ with John (John 20: 8).

I begin here in part because we can see Eriugena displaying the skills of figural or spiritual reading that were so integral to mystical theology in the first millennium of

Christian history and beyond. We see Eriugena take the letter of John's Gospel and find within and beyond the letter figures of the moral and mystical life—we catch him in the act of spiritual interpretation. But even more, the figural reading he offers is itself testimony to and commentary upon the understanding of scripture that is the foundation of any mystical theology of scripture: scripture is the locus of encounter with the living Christ, with the 'mysteries of his divinity and humanity'. It is the saturated or sacramental word, filled to over-brimming with God's presence. 'For he himself is the fountain and fullness of graces, the truth of the symbols of the laws, the end of the visions of prophets' (Homily on the Prologue of John 23; Jeaneau 1969: 316). As such, scripture is an abundant inner garden, the place of intimate encounter between the Soul as Bride and Christ as the Bridegroom. As Eriugena makes clear, scripture may appear to be a dead letter, a relic of a history that has passed. But to 'see and believe' scripture is to begin to ascend to intimate union with Christ the Bridegroom.

In this chapter, I aim to trace the pattern of reading and relating to the scriptural word that Eriugena exemplifies—a pattern that was intimately woven into the fabric of mystical theology for more than a millennium of Christian practice. While the 'spiritual interpretation of scripture' is usually considered as a technical method of biblical exegesis, Henri de Lubac's monumental work in *History and Spirit* and *Medieval Exegesis* argued that 'spiritual interpretation' was less a literary technique than a spiritual itinerary. What came to be called the 'fourfold sense' names an orientation to transformational encounter with the living Christ. The allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses of scripture signal dimensions of a deepening absorption in and interiorization of the Word. But already by the later Middle Ages, Christian readers' perception of scripture as this privileged point of encounter with Christ had shifted, subtly but significantly. The 'technologization' and 'professionalization' of scripture in the schools in the later Middle Ages gradually drove a wedge between scriptural understanding and the transformational encounter of the soul with God. Even the 'spiritual sense' of scripture had been granted a kind of extrinsic objectivity, apart from the life of prayer and discipleship of its hearers and interpreters. 'Spiritual exegesis' came to be understood narrowly as the work of doctrinal exposition and not spiritual transformation. The 'mystical' came to refer not to the wisdom deep in the roots of scripture but to the subjective experience of the soul, while 'allegory' became more and more a mode of literary criticism. As Michel de Certeau suggests, the culmination of this process led to the scriptures falling mute in the early modern age, and the pattern of 'spiritual interpretation' as interior journey was lost (de Certeau 1992).

In retracing this pattern, I will not always proceed chronologically. While of course there are important differences in method, approach, and theological interest among various patristic exegetes and, even more, among patristic and medieval exegetes over the millennium, what I hope to highlight is a set of assumptions and practices that were more or less shared by 'pre-critical' readers of the scriptural text and that illustrate the intimate connection between scriptural reading and mystical theology. Because the pattern is essentially lost to us now, how we came to lose it will be part of the story I wish to tell. But I hope to do so in the service of a broader project of recovery. In the presence of Christ,

even the mute may speak again. If modern Christian readers, like Mary Magdalene, have lamented the empty tomb, 'because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him', we, too, may hear his voice again and cry 'Rabboni!'

THE SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE: A HERMENEUTICS OF FERTILITY

Much has been written about patristic exegesis and its centrality for our understanding of the early Church. As Robert Wilken says, 'The Bible was... more than a platform on which to build something else, and biblical interpretation was not a stage on the way to the work of real thinking. Thinking took place through exegesis, and the language of the Bible became the language of early Christian thought' (Wilken 2003: 77). As a result, 'exegesis was theological, and theology was exegetical' (Wilken 2003: 315). For a later thinker such as Bonaventure, the very diversity of genres and voices within scripture bears witness to its final purpose, 'to give us human wayfarers as much knowledge as we need to achieve salvation'. Scripture uses 'language that is sometimes literal, sometimes symbolic, as in a kind of *summa*' to illuminate 'the breadth and length and height and depth of the entire universe, insofar as it is expedient to have knowledge of it for salvation' (Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, prol. o.3; Monti 2005: 3). It is now a commonplace to recognize the importance of scriptural exegesis in the early doctrinal debates on the Trinity and Christology, and it continued to be the practice, well into the thirteenth century, to use the terms 'theology', 'sacred doctrine', 'the sacred page', and 'scripture' almost interchangeably. The centrality of scripture to theological practice is clear. But while we acknowledge the centrality of scripture as a cultural and theological artefact, our own desire to treat scripture's place with seriousness and rigour may obscure its deeper and yet more comprehensive role in the prayer and spiritual itinerary of the Christian faithful. Beyond providing language for doctrine, thought, and culture, the Bible was known to be a place to encounter a way of life and examine one's own heart. In the words of Gregory the Great, 'we understand the words of God more truly when we "search out [ourselves] in them"' (in Wilken 2003: 77).

Indeed, for these patristic and medieval theologians, there is a kind of reciprocity of depth between scripture and the soul. Scripture, in this view, is a rich semantic field of potentially endless insights. Scripture is 'like a river both shallow and deep, in which a lamb walks and an elephant swims' (Gregory the Great, Letter to Leander; Kerns 2014: 53). Never too deep for the novice or the child, scripture would continue to reveal deepening fathoms of wisdom in response to deeper and deeper inquiry. For Bonaventure, 'scripture has a manifold meaning so that it may win over every mind, meeting each at its own level while remaining superior to all, illuminating and igniting with shafts of love every mind that searches it with care' (*Breviloquium* prol. 4.3; Monti 2005: 15).

Scripture's manifold richness finds its fitting home in the depths of the soul, because 'the soul is a paradise in which scripture is planted, and it has marvelous aspects of sweetness and beauty. Hence in the Canticle, "My sister, my spouse is a garden enclosed . . . a fountain sealed up" [Song of Songs 4: 12]. The soul is a garden . . . where a fountain of spiritual outpourings gushes forth' (Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* 17.5; Quarrachi edn 1882: 410). Scripture both sows the soul with 'an infinity of seeds' and nourishes the seeds into fruit to feed both the intellect and the affect. These seeds are fed and watered by the abundant river flowing from scripture as the Tree of Life. The seeds mature and bear fruit, intellectual and affective. Invoking Psalm 132 (133) and Revelation 22, Bonaventure describes the harvest:

And so, descending from charity, that oil flowing from the head over the beard down to the collar of his robes, bearing fruit in the love of God, of myself, of my neighbor, and my body. As there are twelve fruits from the twelve illuminations ascending to love, so there are twelve fruits descending. This is what is said in the Apocalypse: 'On both sides of the river was the tree of life, yielding twelve fruits for the twelve months.' On one side of the river, the intellectual fruits; on the other, the affective; or on one side the ascending fruits, and on the other the descending.

(Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* 18.31; Quarrachi edn 1882: 419)

Much could be said about the use of symbol and number, the relationship between affect and intellect, and so on, but for our purposes, it is the vision of scripture's teeming abundance of spiritual fruit within the fertile garden of the soul that comes from its intimate connection to and infusion in the soul. The deep, pre-articulate assumption of spiritual exegesis in early and medieval Christianity is that scripture is bursting and overflowing with meaning, with a kind of unfathomable semantic amplitude. In what we might term a *fundamental hermeneutics of fertility*, the soul is a verdant enclosure that finds its centre and its nourishment in the ceaseless waters of Siloe and the tree of life—nourishment, that is, from scripture.

This encounter of text and heart, the encounter that continually deepens in both the understanding of the text and the awareness of the interior human soul, is a fundamental principle of the 'spiritual interpretation of scripture'. Few have done more to describe this lost dimension of scriptural reading than the great historical theologian Henri de Lubac. De Lubac aimed to describe a distinctive mode of Christian biblical interpretation that, as he says of Origen's work, 'was a whole manner of thinking, a whole new world view . . . Even more, through this "spiritual understanding" of Scripture, it was Christianity itself that appeared' (de Lubac 2007: 11). Although this ancient mode of 'spiritual exegesis' has been decried by many critics since the Reformation as fanciful and even dishonest invention, de Lubac sought to retrieve its intelligibility, because this very exegesis bore witness to the 'permanent foundations of Christian thought' (de Lubac 2007: 431). From his study of Origen, *History and Spirit*, to his great *opus magnum et arduum*, *Medieval Exegesis*, de Lubac sought to uncover, to remember, this mode of reading scripture that engaged and transformed the reader.

While de Lubac's multivolume work on medieval exegesis is subtitled, 'The Fourfold Sense of Scripture', he is quite clear in the first volume: 'the Christian tradition understands that Scripture has two meanings'. In the order of discovery, this twofold character is identified with the Old and New Testaments.

For the Christian there exist two successive 'Testaments,' which are not primarily or even essentially two books, but two 'economies,' two 'dispensations,' two 'covenants,' ... established by God one after the other in order to regulate man's relationship with him. (de Lubac 1998: 227)

But the ordering of these two covenants is not simply chronological but theological and mystagogical. The event of the incarnation radiates back in time, transforming our perception of the Old Testament, even as it radiates forward, such that the purpose of scripture 'still needs to be accomplished and is actually accomplished in us each day, by the mystery of spiritual understanding' (de Lubac 1998: 227). For de Lubac, the 'spiritual sense' of scripture is nothing less than the transformative power of the revelation of God in Christ, applied to scriptural understanding. The task of the interpreter is to allow that signal event to penetrate more and more deeply into one's own understanding. The end result is not simply a new covenant with a new Gentile people, but a community of disciples continually in the process of distilling and discerning the implications of that revelation for their present life and future hope. The traditional 'fourfold sense' honours and explicates this fundamental division between letter and spirit; the latter three 'senses' are subdivisions of the 'spiritual sense,' simply sketching the itinerary of that distilling and discerning:

*littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria
moralia quod agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The letter teaches deeds; allegory, what you should believe;

The moral, what you should do; the anagogical, where you should be headed.

Seen in this light, the various senses are not so much discrete quadrants of meaning as elements in a dynamic flow-chart, diagramming the movement of the reader's soul. The literal sense of scripture (*littera*) tells of the events of God's action in the world, and it by its very nature leads to allegorical questions—what does this action of God in the world reveal about Christ and his Church (*allegoria*)? The movement from the literal to the allegorical is the temporal movement from old to new, from promise to fulfilment. This historical movement parallels the movement of the soul from the Pauline 'outer man' to the 'inner,' into her own appropriation of her baptismal identity in the Body of Christ. Allegory then yields to tropology, or *moralia*, as the interpreter asks not about Christ and the Church in general but about his or her own soul and conduct, as a personal response to the truth revealed in allegory. In *moralia*, says de Lubac, 'there is expounded an asceticism and a mysticism that has a christological, ecclesial and sacramental complexion. Founded as it is on dogma, it is a veritable history of the spiritual life'

(de Lubac 1998: 147). As the word is even further interiorized, questions of moral conduct both point to and yield to *anagoria*, the attractive intimacy of divine love that is both *mystical* (as a taste in present attainment) and *eschatological* (as the anticipated completion, when ‘God will be all in all). “‘The joys of the eternal realm are,” as Saint Gregory says, “the secret joys of the interior life”’ (de Lubac 1998: 187). Through the analogical sense, ‘By the unfolding of events and stories, . . . we are led step by step, as it were, to eternity’ (Gregory the Great, *Moral Teaching* 2009, 194). Taken together, the fourfold sense identifies a transformative path through scripture that is not only moral but mystagogical, entailing a deeper and ever more intimate appropriation and absorption of the scriptural word into the life of discipleship, culminating in union with God.

De Lubac’s account has been critiqued for its broad generalizations that seem to distinguish Christian exegesis and speculation too easily from the Hellenistic culture in which they arise. Frances Young’s *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* is one exemplar among several that set the methods of early biblical interpretation within a thick description of early Christian intellectual culture. Young illuminates the many and various interpretive strategies from the ancient schools of rhetoric that Christian exegetes deployed, appropriated, or transformed. This rich (and sometimes overwhelming) plurality belies any claim to capture early Christian exegetical practice according to our traditional categories of ‘Alexandrian’ vs. ‘Antiochene’ schools, and certainly not into any univocal view of the ‘fourfold sense’. Lewis Ayres has argued more recently that this rich ‘soup’ of classical grammatical, rhetorical, and philosophical techniques does not in any way diminish the distinctively Christian character of this work. Scripture, says Ayres, always exerts a kind of ‘centripetal force’ by which the interpretive practices of the ancient world are drawn into the horizon of Christian reflection and life (Ayres 2015: 1). ‘In the fourth and fifth centuries, as in the late second, the text of scripture does not just give rise to thought, it disrupts speculation, forcing the acknowledgement of mystery and incompleteness at the heart of the Christian speculative enterprise’ (Ayres 2015: 13). This acknowledgement engenders certain ‘practices of attention to the work of the Spirit or grace through providence, through personal experience, and thus a consequent re-imagining of the relationships that are intrinsic to human existence’ (Ayres 2015: 15). Early Christian scriptural interpretation draws upon so wide a variety of sources and methods that de Lubac’s ‘fourfold sense’ must fail as anything like a comprehensive account of exegetical method or technique. But such (contrary to many assumptions) was not his intent. Rather, the ‘fourfold sense’ becomes a heuristic frame that brings together many interpretive strategies and practices under an intelligible theological and mystagogical itinerary. The speculative lineaments of the ‘centripetal pull’ Ayres describes do themselves bear witness to a mystical theological trajectory, the overall dynamic that later medieval exegetes distilled and that de Lubac aimed to describe.

Scriptural exegesis was thus fundamentally a *disciplina*, not in the sense of a methodologically defined academic field of study, but in the sense of a spiritual discipline, a practice, a mystagogy (see Ayres 2008). This is certainly not to say that it did not involve serious philological and hermeneutical study, nor that scriptural exegesis was not central to

doctrinal disputes in which the plain sense of scripture was dialectically engaged or contested. Rather, it is to say that these technical skills and dialectical engagements were taken up into and held within a broader ascetic discipline of scriptural reading. Indeed, Origen, among others, was careful to caution his readers to be sure that they have advanced far enough in the Christian life to be able to read spiritually. In his *Song of Songs* commentary, he first takes a lesson from the pedagogical order of the books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and then the Song of Songs. Proverbs, he says, teaches ‘the moral science, putting rules for living into the form of short and pithy maxims’ (Origen, *Comm. on Song* prol.; tr. Lawson 1957: 41). Ecclesiastes ‘counsels us to forsake vanity and cultivate things useful and upright’ (Origen, *Comm. on Song* prol.; tr. Lawson 1957: 41). Lastly, the ‘inspective’ science of the Song of Songs ‘instills into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly’ (Origen, *Comm. on Song* prol.; tr. Lawson 1957: 41). The Song of Songs ‘comes last that a man may come to it when his manner of life has been purified, and he has learned to know the difference between things corruptible and things incorruptible’ (Origen, *Comm. on Song* prol.; tr. Lawson 1957: 44). For Origen, scriptural reading was an ascetic ascent itself. If we consider this dynamic trajectory in light of Bernard McGinn’s definition of mysticism, as ‘that part, or element, of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves describe as a direct and transformative presence of God’ (McGinn 2006: p. xiv), then it is not really enough to say that mystical theology was expressed through biblical exegesis. Rather, for the first millennium, scriptural exegesis, in its very logic and movement, was itself a mystical path.

EROS AND EXEGESIS

Indeed, it may be fairly said that the dynamic movement of patristic and medieval exegesis bears witness to the centrality of the Song of Songs not only as a book of interest, but, in a sense, as the fitting culmination of all scriptural interpretation. Origen himself describes the ‘Song of Songs’ as the apex and Sabbath of scriptural songs, tracing the movement from the Song of Moses in the Exodus to the songs sung in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Judges, Kings, and the Psalms. ‘All those songs...were introductory songs sung by the Bridegroom’s friends; but this unique song is that which the Bridegroom Himself was to sing as His marriage hymn when about to take His Bride’ (Origen, *Comm. on Song*; tr. Lawson 1957: 46). This subtle work of synecdoche conforms all scriptural exegesis to this marital hymn of union. The broader ‘hermeneutics of fertility’ are charged with erotic desire; the garden of the soul is the nuptial enclosed garden, the meeting place of the Bridegroom and the Bride (Song of Songs 4: 12, 5: 1–6). Scriptural exegesis as such, in all its richness, is the work of preparation for and sharing in the mystical union of the Bride and Bridegroom.

Indeed, for Bonaventure as well, the soul restored by grace is transformed and made ready for the *Song of Songs*. Her spiritual senses are awakened, and ‘the soul now sees,

hears, smells, tastes, and embraces her beloved, and can sing as a bride the *Canticle of Canticles*, which was composed for the exercise of contemplation' (Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* 4.3; tr. Boehner 1956: 75). Bonaventure continues: 'On this level of contemplation, the study of the divinely committed Sacred Scriptures is most especially helpful...especially...its three spiritual meanings', the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical (*Itinerarium* 4.6; tr. Boehner 1956: 77). Bonaventure connects the spiritual progress of the soul, restored by grace and capable of receiving and perceiving the Word within as her Bridegroom, to the practice of spiritual exegesis as such. In a sense, spiritual exegesis is the proper activity of the soul-made-Bride.

To see scriptural study as an erotic mystical itinerary is not to reduce scripture but properly to expand the scope of mystical theology. Mystical theology, in this view, is not one mode or subdiscipline of theology, but the proper scope and rationale, both practical and speculative, of the whole of theological study. This is so because *eros*, passionate desiring love, for Origen and those who follow in his wake, is at the very root of God's creation. It is God's *eros* that entices God to create, and all created things are imbued with the dynamism of this *eros*. And it is *eros* that entices God to 'empty himself' and 'become obedient to death, even death on a cross' (Phil. 2: 7–8). To understand God's creative and redemptive action is to contemplate the dynamics of *eros*, in the created order as a whole and within the human soul. The soul's return to God comes from what McGinn describes as 'the teleological specification of the objects of desire', that is, by turning human desire from inferior and external goods to the superior and interior Good, God himself (McGinn 1991: 120).

Denys Turner has pointed out that the Song of Songs is itself a song of longing and anticipation, not fulfilment. 'The Song is a poem charged with a sense of sexual fulfillment *anticipated*. *Eros* or *amor* are best translated as 'yearning' or 'longing', words that express 'the tensions of interplay between "presence" and "absence," between "now", but "not yet", between the "possession" of the beloved and his "elusiveness", of "oneness with" and "otherness than"' (Turner 1995: 85). This tensive play in the Song displays in microcosm the Christian theological sense that 'history is a fabric of overlapping strands of longing and satisfaction, of promises and fulfillments, stretching across all time. Every epoch of history is, as it were, a wedding day' (Turner 1995: 86). As Gregory the Great attests, 'the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, we now present to the eyes as one Bride who in the Law perceived the scents of the spiritual gift; but now she seeks the presence of the Bridegroom himself and says, "may he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth"' (Gregory, *Expositiones in Canticum Canticorum* 12; ed. Verbraken 1963: 14–15).

And, if this is the story of the Church in history as a whole, it is also the story of each soul. 'But this, which we have said in a general way about the whole church, we now experience truly in a special way of each and every soul' (Gregory the Great, *Expositiones in Canticum Canticorum*, 15; ed. Verbraken 1963: 17). The Church, and each soul in the Church, here in this life, longs for the presence of God in the world to come. But this longing is dialectical, shot through with hints, glimpses, tastes of presence even as the Church and the soul wait. 'Note, as she sighs, while she is seeking as if for one absent, suddenly she is aware of his presence. For it happens by the grace of our Creator, that

when we seekers are speaking of him we actually enjoy his presence' (Gregory, *Expositiones in Canticum Canticorum* 13; ed. Verbraken 1963: 15). Like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, the burning hearts of the souls *in via* testify to God's presence, even as he vanishes from their sight (Gregory, *Expositiones in Canticum Canticorum* 13; ed. Verbraken 1963: 15). In this light, the Song is not the tool for sublimating sexual desire; rather, sexual desire, as displayed in the Song, stands as a kind of master analogy for and participation in the structure of life in time and history as such. And so exegesis of the Song becomes a kind of hermeneutical master key to the interpretation of all of scripture.

It is therefore not at all surprising to find so very many manuscripts of Song of Songs commentaries in the early Middle Ages, with nearly one hundred extant commentaries and homilies on the Song written between the sixth and fifteenth centuries (Matter 1990: 3). In her erudite *The Voice of My Beloved*, E. Ann Matter argues that commentary on the Song constituted a new and distinct genre so central to medieval poetics as to be a 'metacritical genre, one that provides an important key to other literary forms' (Matter 1990: 11). To this I would only add that it provides a precisely theological and mystagogical key that was thought to unlock the rest of scripture itself. The Song embodies the give and take of ascetic ascent that all of scripture intends; to read the Song was to tap into the dynamic energy that courses through every scriptural book and verse.

To modern historical-critically trained eyes, positing such a 'master key' may seem to reduce or narrow the scope of scripture to a devotional or moral programme. But the work of speculation and argument about scripture, the rigorous philological and linguistic exploration of the letter of scripture continues, as Origen's own oeuvre bears witness. Origen's *Hexapla*, a six-columned edition comparing multiple versions of the scriptural texts in multiple languages, likely adding up to 6,000 pages in more than fifteen volumes, bears witness to his close scholarly attention to the linguistic and textual complexities of scripture. His example would be taken up and echoed through centuries of scriptural scholarship—though not perhaps with the same superhuman erudition of the great Alexandrian—up to the *Glossa ordinaria* of the twelfth century. It would be a mistake, therefore, whether in the third century, the thirteenth century, or the twenty-first century, to imagine that scholarly rigour or the disciplines of biblical study are intrinsically enemies of spiritual exegesis. How is it, then, that these have come to be understood as opposed?

THE DISINTEGRATION OF MYSTAGOGY: FRACTURES OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Henri de Lubac suggests that the mystagogical dimension of spiritual exegesis began to disappear under two related but distinct phenomena of the twelfth century. What M. D. Chenu described as the 'new awareness of history' is reflected in the tendency

to immanentize the eschatological and to historicize the mystical. For example, while Joachim of Fiore's discernment of a coming 'third status' of the Holy Spirit, centred on the *intellectus spiritualis*, the spiritual understanding of scripture, could be seen in one way like the fructification of monastic exegesis, the unintended effect of this schema was to flatten the resonances of scriptural symbol and language, precisely by identifying them with particular persons and ages of history. 'Absent critical reflection as well as a certain interiority, [Joachim] ... projected in space and time the symbols that the meditation on Scripture caused to spring up in his heart' (de Lubac 2009: 419). It would be too much to lay this all at Joachim's feet; he remains just the most vivid of monastic visionary exegetes that would include Anselm of Havelberg, Gerhoh of Reichersberg, Rupert of Deutz, and perhaps even Hildegard of Bingen. All of these, to greater or lesser extent, bear witness to this immanent tethering of the spiritual sense to history.

At the same time, the rise of scholastic dialectical rationality begins to alter the meaning of the fourfold sense even as it adopted it. To give a prominent example, the School of St Victor holds a prominent place in Beryl Smalley's history of exegesis as the centre of a new emphasis on the literal and 'Hebraic' sense of the Old Testament text. In its great master Hugh, these scholars find the birth of a new and more rigorously scientific method of scriptural scholarship. De Lubac argues, to the contrary, that, 'far from revolutionizing the principles of exegesis by attacking the old allegorizing routine, Hugh of St. Victor is merely trying to consolidate the imperiled tradition' (de Lubac 2009: 222). If Hugh cautions against biblical interpretations that take liberties, he is less concerned with excesses of traditional allegory than with 'indiscreet theological speculation, a rationalistic tendency, ... *curiositas*' (de Lubac 2009: 229). 'The principal abuse against which Hugh protested ... did not come from an old "routine": ... it was rather more the seduction of novelty ... Against this seduction, Hugh of St. Victor was driven, in his work of reorganization, to maintain the spirit of past centuries' (de Lubac 2009: 253). One might conceive Hugh's reorganization as a kind of response to the kinds of innovation found in Joachim, Hildegard, Gerhoh, and the like.

Nevertheless, Hugh does do the work of reorganization, and, in so doing, he does set into motion a gradual change, not yet in the schema of 'spiritual interpretation' as represented by the 'fourfold sense', but rather in the nature of relations among those senses. Hugh's innovation, even if it was intended to conserve the view of the Fathers, was to distinguish between what Chenu called the 'two pieces' of theology, 'the *lectio historiae* and the construction of *allegoria*' (Chenu 1997: 166). By so distinguishing these two pieces of discourse, Hugh intended to integrate the spiritual interpretation of scripture into a systematic and progressive programme of education. Hugh sought to make the 'habitual framework' of the fourfold sense, as the mystagogical path that had to be 'caught rather than taught', into discrete and teachable skills or practices. As a result, what had been the organic relationship of letter to spirit in Hugh's work became distinct 'orders', studied under two different but consecutive *disciplinae*, one 'historical' and one 'theological'. Allegory, as a new order, came to have a method and structure separate from *historia*, and so, in practice, from exegesis itself.

[Historia] will become historical and literal exegesis, free, when the time comes, to change into a veritable 'positive' scholarship;...one day it will be 'criticism'; it will even become, for many, religiously neutral, the exegete leaving to the theologian the burden of doctrinal commitments. At the same time, because of this separation, the second discipline will be free to organize itself more and more as an autonomous system. It will progress in rationality and in abstraction, to become the majestic edifice of the Summas of the great epoch... (de Lubac 2009: 314)

Of course, this was not Hugh of St Victor's intent; quite to the contrary, he hoped to hold together the patristic wisdom, precisely by integrating it into a system of education that could pass this wisdom on to students of a younger generation. And yet that very systematization set in motion a gradual process of rationalization and separation. In the wake of the Victorines, the language of the senses of scripture survived, but it came to designate three distinct sciences or disciplines—exegesis, theology, and spirituality—which later masters such as Bonaventure and Thomas would seek to hold together, but in their case almost in spite of, rather than through, the dialectical disciplinary modes in which they were trained (de Lubac 2009: 315–26).

And so the 'dawn of biblical scholarship' in the Victorine school celebrated by Beryl Smalley is one of several separated strands to emerge in the wake of the great master Hugh. Richard and Adam of St Victor, Peter Comestor, Peter Chanter, all carry forward a certain mode of separated critical exegesis, while scholastic theology *per se* takes off in earnest in Peter Lombard and the other early scholastic *Summa* authors. And, to round out the equation, the great Victorine Thomas Gallus (of Vercelli) generates a school of spirituality in his mystical readings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. While the language of the 'fourfold senses of scripture' would persist well into the later Middle Ages, its signification had changed radically. It is clear that, for de Lubac, the integrating equilibrium of the fourfold sense has been lost. Once again, it is important to note, with de Lubac, that the sort of hypertrophic innovative readings of scripture in late monastic culture, as seen in Joachim, Rupert, and Gerhoh, provoke Hugh and Thomas and other sceptics of spiritual exegesis to seek a firmer ground. Traditional monastic exegesis had grown overripe and imprecise; a new mode of engagement was required, a mode more dialectical and scientific in nature. And yet the new modes that arose carried a significant cost—a cost, according to de Lubac, that we continue to pay today.

Rationalization of the theological endeavour in the scholastic movement, then, is the most significant factor that gradually unravels the tightly integrated elements of spiritual exegesis. Patristic and monastic exegesis was intended *delectare et prodesse*, to delight and to prosper, and in service of this end it was governed by the practice of study and contemplation itself (Studer 1988). The scholastic model of theology operated with more rigorous 'scientific' criteria. In order to shore up the sense of *sacra doctrina* as a proper *scientia* and so a fully rational body of knowledge, first Hugh and then later Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics begin to drive a wedge between deepening spiritual interpretation and the progress of the soul. Knowledge (*scientia*) of scripture became located in the literal sense; by implication, the 'spiritual sense' is here a rhetorical

enrichment. If 'nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by the Scripture in its literal sense', then the literal sense becomes the measure, and not the foundation and point of departure, of scriptural knowledge (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q1.a10.r1; English Dominicans 2013: 17). That is, the primary sense of 'knowledge' is taken to be what is proper for argument, and this is constrained to the literal sense. The very desire to develop scriptural exegesis into a reliable and transferable institutional programme of education and disputation subtly shifts the orientation of the 'senses' from elements in a spiritual itinerary of deeper and deeper appropriation of the word to distinct areas of interest, spheres of meaning, or subdisciplines. What was intended as a means of transmitting scriptural wisdom to students, says de Lubac, subtly transformed that wisdom into a kind of 'know-how' in a technical field. The 'senses' of scripture, originally conceived of perhaps as mile markers along the path of interiorizing the Word of God, are cast by dialectical scholastic reasoning into discrete parts or forms of scriptural language. The link between the 'senses' of scripture and the dynamic movement of the soul into God was all but lost, even as the external form remains. Indeed, the notorious Latin scholastic couplet quoted above (*littera gesta docet...*) comes, we think, from the late thirteenth century, from the end rather than the beginning of this epoch.

Ironically, the Reformation, even as it attempted to rely on *sola scriptura* and to set the Bible free from scholastic grasp, still left scripture alienated from the structure of transformative scriptural practice, of the disciplined and transformative reading that had been at the heart of scriptural reading for over a millennium prior. *Sola scriptura* would seem to make scripture accessible, but it did so following all too closely upon the flattened scriptural sensibility that had emerged out of the later Middle Ages, of scripture primarily as the deliverer of information. 'Scripture is objective truth,' says Andrew Louth, 'the objective truth of God's revelation. Allegory, then, seems to be a way of evading the address of God to man in the Scriptures, a way of adulterating the purity of divine revelation with human opinions and conjecture. Allegory, from such a point of view, is fundamentally faithless, irreligious' (Louth 1983: 98). The Reformed sense of *scriptura* relied upon the late medieval sense of scripture as the deliverer of doctrinal truth. As Louth says, 'the principle of *sola scriptura* suggests that the truth of the Christian religion is contained in Scripture, and that the work of the theologian and exegete [or even of the believer] is to extract this truth by rightly interpreting Scripture' (Louth 1983: 99). This doctrinal truth, for Luther, Calvin, and other reformers, was indeed taken to be radically transformative of the Christian subject's self-understanding and believed to deliver subjective certainty, but it delivered subjective certainty of the objective knowledge of God's work of justification in Christ, as revealed and contained in the Bible. Scripture was not mystagogical because, in a sense, there was nowhere for the soul to be led.

Following the Reformation and the chaotic bloodshed and social collapse that followed in its wake, Brad Gregory has suggested that, for both Protestants and Catholics, theology took flight from public discourse altogether, becoming more and more insulated within the claustrophobic environs of theology faculties (Gregory 2012). In Catholic circles, this led to the virtual silencing of the scriptural word in the lives of the faithful. The 'birth of the laity' and the dawn of vernacular theologies in what McGinn

calls ‘the new mysticism’ had already expanded the mystical theological horizon to include lay, vernacular, and female voices in a radically new way from the thirteenth century. These new voices had already eschewed traditional scriptural modes of discourse and crafted new genres of what Michel de Certeau calls ‘mystic speech.’ This eschewal expanded and deepened in early modernity, as scripture faltered as a reliable ‘tent of meeting’ for God, the soul, and the Church. ‘From this time onward, [the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] the *invocatio* and the *auditio fidei* become isolated from the scriptural corpus, which recedes and is read “from a distance,” and turned into the object either of logical treatment by scholastic theology or historical treatment by positive theology’ (Ward 2000: 196). For de Certeau, ‘mystic speech’ is provoked or elicited by this distancing of the scriptural word, to fill the void that scripture once suffused, even for university-trained male clerical writers. John of the Cross, for example, was scholastically trained, but he composed his mystical theology in *canciones*, poetic utterances that imitate and improvise around the text and tropes of the Song of Songs, but never amount to ‘commentary’ upon the Song itself.

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling you, but you were gone.

(John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* 1;
tr. Kavanaugh 1991: 471)

It is as if the scriptural Song itself has, for John, fallen silent; his comment on this first stanza could be taken in several ways: ‘This is like saying: O Word, my Spouse, show me where you are hidden’ (John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, Commentary on Stanza 1.3; tr. Kavanaugh 1991: 478). John is clearly invoking the Bride’s bereft search in Song of Songs (3: 1–3; 5: 6–7), but he does it in so compact a form that the poem itself is a kind of seeking for where the Word is hidden. Instead of finding the Word in the scriptural words, John’s own poetic songs become the new locus of the erotic encounter of the Bridegroom and the Bride, and, in a fascinating mimetic echo, the poems become themselves the locus of his own exegetical practice. In John, the disciplines of spiritual exegesis, in a sense, have migrated from their scriptural home, and the scriptures themselves recede from view, hidden away in *studia* and dicasteries of the ‘experts’.

‘WOMAN, WHY ARE YOU WEEPING? WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?’

The subsequent history of biblical interpretation, from the Enlightenment and Lessing’s ditch to the various modes of form, source, and redaction criticism, to more recent efforts in social theory, discourse analysis, biblical linguistics, etc., to more recent attempts to

recover 'biblical theology' or the 'theological interpretation of scripture', has been told and retold with greater precision than I could hope to muster, especially in this limited space. But if de Lubac and de Certeau and Louth are right, 'higher criticism' arrives after the habits of a mystagogical scriptural exegesis have long receded. As A. K. M. Adam has suggested, some contemporary 'biblical theology' and 'theological interpretation' movements, for all their promise, may still themselves be freighted with the late medieval and Reformation legacy of reading scripture as a textual repository of information, where interpretation means to 'get something out' of the text (Adam 2006: 17, 22). 'This narrow approach to theological meaning lends itself to polemics and exclusion, to the *enclosure* of a realm of expression in which meaning's abundance can be confined to authorized, legitimized expressions' (Adam 2006: 18). Adam offers an alternative proposal, to consider scriptural interpretation as a 'signifying practice' that 'would not involve just, or primarily, the verbal interpretation of verbal texts, but a way of living that deliberately enters into the ocean of signification that encompasses us and seeks a way to learn, to perpetuate, and to propagate the significance of the biblical proclamation' (Adam 2006: 28). Adam's emphasis on scriptural interpretation as a practice embedded in an ecclesial life and much more comprehensive in scope than the work of the classroom helps us towards an understanding of scriptural interpretation that is closer to the patristic and medieval vision. 'To deliberately enter into the ocean of signification' is to echo the 'hermeneutic of fertility' found in the spiritual interpretation of scripture from Origen on.

In a similar way, Matthew Levering's 'biblical Thomism' helpfully advocates for a metaphysical perspective capacious enough to hold together divine and human action in scripture (and in interpretation) without confusion or conflict. Levering has pointed to the historical coincidence of the 'flattening' of scriptural interpretation as I have described it here and a parallel 'flattening' of metaphysics in the later Middle Ages. Whether we lay responsibility at the feet of Scotist univocity or some other turn, it is evident that late medieval metaphysics lost its hold on the classical Aristotelian and Neoplatonic framework of exemplarity and participation. 'Lacking a rich account of participation and analogy, reality is "desymbolized": human time is no longer understood as caught up in a participatory relationship with God, and history becomes a strictly linear, horizontal, intratemporal series of moments' (Levering 2008: 19). To such a horizontal, intratemporal serial history, God is radically extrinsic, perhaps only 'intervening' from without on special miraculous occasions. 'God, in effect, becomes causal will, intervening in creaturely reality from outside but unconnected to the creation' (Levering 2008: 24). For Levering, only a full-throated revival of the 'participatory metaphysics' of the patristic and medieval era can create the proper setting for biblical interpretation. '[A] Christological theology of history, which depends on a metaphysics of participation inscribed in creation, provides the necessary frame for apprehending the true meaning of biblical texts' (Levering 2008: 22). While he has been critiqued for conceiving of this 'metaphysics of participation' in too narrowly an Aristotelian and Neoplatonic way, he is right to see the necessity of a rational account of the intelligible relationship between the divine and human, of immanence and transcendence, and

Christian Neoplatonism has developed a sophisticated vocabulary over centuries to articulate this well. But is this classical metaphysical horizon sufficient to revive scriptural interpretation as an encounter with the Word?

Responding to Levering, Ephraim Radner recognizes in his recent book that 'the moral foundation of scriptural reference, if nothing else, had grounded its credibility in the claim, intrinsic it seems to scriptural articulation itself, that God is the creator of the very times in which we seek to find our meaning' (Radner 2016: 82). If we are to rely on scripture as an authority, we are dependent upon our faith that God is acting in the world in which scripture appears. Reluctant to associate the theological interpretation of scripture with any one particular metaphysical system, Radner prefers a more narrowly theological parameter or background belief, the 'creative omnipotence' or 'divine purposive omnipotence' of God (Radner 2016: 111, 118). For Radner, this frees theological interpretation from the particulars of this or that metaphysical schema; in principle, the 'creative omnipotence' of God could be explicated in any of several theological idioms. The crucial element, however explained metaphysically, is that the world be conceived of as a 'comprehensive sphere, in which the natural and the miraculous are both ordinary in terms of God's omnipresent power' (Radner 2016: 133). The principle of cohesion in such a sphere is 'the ordinariness of God's relating will, bringing all these elements into an efficacious whole of meaning, which thereby allows for the symbolization of the universe on a level that is beyond the merely semiotic, in a human sense' (Radner 2016: 133). Radner's reluctance to bind the theological (figural) reading of scripture to any one system is understandable, and his desire for a properly theological alternative ground is praiseworthy. But it seems to me that the alternative he provides is not quite the neutral or properly scriptural foundation he intends it to be. With such emphasis on 'will' and 'power,' Radner's account sketches an image of God's relation to the world as, finally, extrinsic. Indeed, this seems to be his intended aim: admitting that a 'Dionysian' hierarchical universe of participation in being lends itself easily to symbolic interpretations that make the figural reading of scripture conceivable, he asks, 'is there any logical reason why a merely ordered universe of beings, whose interrelationships derive from the orderer and not from the intrinsic traces, within each being, of the orderer, cannot also be equally susceptible to figural apprehension?' (Radner 2016: 120). Radner tends to follow in train with William of Ockham, who perceives the world as a semiotic system that refers to God by power of will. Ockham takes Augustine's account of the conventional nature of human signs and divorces it from the divine immanence that underlies these conventions. The burden of Radner's treatment of Ockham is to show that, with even these metaphysical commitments, figural reading is still possible.

But this sort of figural reading, that perhaps is still found in Ockham and his contemporaries, is already a diminished form of the scriptural hermeneutic found in Origen and the earlier Middle Ages. This sort of limited figural reading may establish theological cords that bind the Old Testament to the New and the Bible itself to the doctrinal formulae of Nicaea and Chalcedon, but it falls short as the sort of transformative itinerary of encounter that we find articulated in Origen, Gregory the Great, Bonaventure, and others. In this Ockhamist frame, scripture, like the rest of created

being, is an effect of God's sovereign will, but not itself a bearer of divine presence. Scripture, in this model, is a report of the Word, but not the indwelling presence of the Word itself.

Nevertheless, Radner's scepticism of the *necessity* of this particular metaphysics has its place as well. If de Lubac's analysis of the decline of the fourfold sense is accurate, the practical decline and failure of the tradition of spiritual exegesis preceded the 'Scotist rupture' in metaphysics. The grip of dialectical practice, of the professionalization and technologization of the Word, began to suffocate the tradition well before Duns Scotus ever taught the univocity of being. If this is correct, then the metaphysical questions are moot in the absence of an integral practice of *ora et labora*, and a Thomistic metaphysics is as prone to the kind of reification of theological knowledge as any other conceptual scheme. For many, classical Christian metaphysics claims present themselves as *ontothology*, as alien assertions of truth imposed upon the world so as to manipulate and control it. I have argued elsewhere that the ontotheological critique of much classical Christian theology may be misplaced (Hughes 2003), but, even if this is so, one might rightly doubt that the recovery of a Christian metaphysics will be sufficient to renew our scriptural practice.

Instead, we need broader retrieval of the mystical tradition and its reapplication, in a new way, to scripture. Such a retrieval will include a certain kind of metaphysical form, but it will include much more—a certain stance toward the scriptural text and toward the encounter with the Living Word within it. I have spoken of the spiritual interpretation as a mystagogical transformation of the soul toward union with God. The consummation and epitome of this movement of transformation is the Song of Songs, the mystical marriage between the Bride and the Bridegroom. In this light, scripture is thus suffused with and rooted in the register of encounter. Whatever the generic mode or historical context of scriptural books, whether narrative or poetic or epistolary, scripture is a place where we meet the living Word. This form of encounter seemed fanciful when empiricist and materialist habits of mind are the default setting for readers, and these habits, ironically, may be particularly hard to unlearn with respect to scripture, for which, among fundamentalists and historical-critical biblical studies critics alike, a flat descriptive or referential mode of reading has dominated discourse, though of course with different modes of expression. For scripture's mystical openness to again appear to us, we will have to transform our very notion of what we are doing when we read scripture. Indeed, I would argue that what is needed is a Christological transposition of ourselves as readers.

Mark McIntosh has developed a notion of 'mystical speech' that calls attention to the ways in which mystical theological texts summon their readers to a transformed way of life (McIntosh 1998: 123–36). Our reading must, says McIntosh, echo the theological structure of reality itself, according to Dionysius and the great mystical theologians, of the *exitus* or sounding forth of God's glory in cataphatic speech of attribution, where first we recognize the signs and manifestation of God's presence in all creation, and of the *reditus*, the ascending return into God in apophysis, the recognition of God's radical exceeding of any speech or concept through which we may name the divine reality. This

cosmic movement from speech to silence, from abundance to inadequacy, is reflected and recapitulated in the texts themselves of great mystical writers. Reading their texts constitutes a 'meaning event,' wherein one, in the words of Michael Sells, engages in 'a rigorous and sustained effort both to use and to free oneself from normal habits of thought and expression. It demands a willingness to let go, at a particular moment, of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability' (Sells 1994: 217). Mystical texts are not therefore descriptions of nor invitations to extraordinary experiences, but 'calls toward a new framework for having experiences whatsoever' (McIntosh 1998: 135). This new framework should not be understood as a confession of finitude or resignation to ignorance. Rather, as McIntosh argues, this new framework itself has a Christological shape.

Christians affirm that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, that is, a Word 'spoken humanly and historically'. That is, God's Word becomes incarnate by kenotically pouring Himself out in self-dispossession (Phil. 2: 7). For McIntosh, 'Jesus' life might be seen as an attempt to hear and understand his hidden (mystical) depths of identity as the eternal Word' (McIntosh 1998: 133). This ongoing work—one might say, Jesus' work of 'spiritual exegesis' of his own life—took the shape of ongoing and continuing emptying and self-dispossession, culminating in the cross itself. It is only in Jesus' 'willingness to let go', his 'moment of vulnerability' on the cross, that the depths of his identity as the Word of the Father are most fully disclosed, though not exhausted. It is in Jesus' own self-dispossession on the cross that the Word shines forth most clearly, as the Gospel of Mark's centurion confesses, 'Truly this man was the Son of God' (Mark 15: 39).

Christians thereafter seek to be 'naked following the naked Christ', *nudus nudum Christum sequens*, echoing that moment of vulnerability, even in their reading. The paschal mystery becomes the hermeneutic key and guide to discerning and encountering the Word. Here, the apophysis of mystical texts invites its readers into a Christological transposition of the reading, from mastery of word and objective reference to vulnerable recipient of the Word in the midst of words. This dynamic of transformation, so well described with respect to mystical theological texts by Sells and McIntosh, may very well have grown out of the scriptures themselves, as early interpreters such as Origen and Gregory the Great seemed to express. But the very 'technologization' of scriptural reading I have described has led us into a deep sort of forgetting, and, indeed, even an aversion to the very vulnerability this paschal hermeneutics requires. In our amnesiac age, it must be reapplied consciously and intentionally to the reading of scripture. We may take what we have learned from mystical texts that are themselves inspired by scripture and reapply it to scripture itself. To read scripture 'spiritually' is so much more than to read it for personal inspiration or subjective interpretation; it is to share in this paschal mode of reading and so thereby be prepared to encounter the Word within.

Such a paschal reading will not displace the dedicated academic work of biblical study, but rather surrounds and subsumes it. The skills of critical reading are essential to bring clarity to the biblical words themselves and the historical and conceptual worlds they describe. 'But', as Jean-Louis Chrétien says, 'the mastery necessary for even a literal comprehension of the writing is here at the service, entirely at the service, of a displacement

of the center of gravity and a loss of mastery' (Chrétien 2015: 10). The act of the intellect is, in this view, both an acting and a yielding, a reading and a being-read. 'It is necessary for the intelligence to make itself a prayer in order for it to become an exegete, that is to say, to read as it allows itself to be read' (Chrétien 2015: 11). Prayer, the paradox itself of agency and receptivity, of act and dispossession, becomes for Chrétien the model of scriptural interpretation.

I began with John Scotus Eriugena's claim that 'Christ's tomb is Holy Scripture, in which the mysteries of his divinity and humanity are secured by the weight of the letter, just as the tomb is secured by the stone.' When the scriptures are often imagined by critical readers as a tomb, as a repository of a dead past, fundamentalist readings of scripture engage in a sort of necromancy, an attempt to conjure the dead letter into a kind of resuscitated life. What these diametrically opposed strategies both lack is a vibrant sense of the charged presence of the Word within the words, what I have called the 'hermeneutic of fertility' that patristic and medieval writers share. It is this fundamental plenitude and surplus of meaning that creates the space, the interior garden in which one draws close to God through the practice of spiritual exegesis. We have seen that the traditional 'fourfold sense' and its variants better describe a mystical itinerary of ascent towards union than a regional 'map' of the various semantic fields of meaning. The spiritual interpretation of scripture, classically understood, moves from the exterior to the interior word, and so to a deeper appropriation of the scriptural word to one's life and prayer. In this sense, scriptural interpretation is an erotic movement of desire, and thus the Song of Songs takes pride of place as summit and model of spiritual exegesis. But we have also seen how this classical understanding, gradually and unintentionally, was replaced by a kind of technological scriptural reading. In the wake of this transformation, it may seem that scripture is empty of its life-giving Word. Like the Bride, we may cry in desperation, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' (Song of Songs 3: 3). Or, like the Magdalene, we may gaze into the empty tomb weeping for the lost Lord. Perhaps it will be through 'turning around', turning to the great mystical texts of our tradition, that we may relearn the practices of reading we have lost, and perhaps through that we will hear again the Word, the Bridegroom, address us by name.

SUGGESTED READING

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CHAPTER 7

THE LITURGICAL MYSTERY

ANDREW LOUTH

IN origin—and, it will be argued, in essence—the eucharistic liturgy is central to a Christian understanding of mystical theology. This has not always been recognized, or at least not clearly: for many centuries in the West ‘mystical theology’ has been seen essentially in terms of the union of the individual soul with God, and there is even a tradition, still apparently needed, that seeks to cope with some kind of acknowledged tension between liturgical prayer and mystical prayer (Laird 2006: 72–3; referring to Chapman 1935: 108). I shall not engage directly with this tradition, but would rather see the treatment here of the liturgical mystery as developing an understanding of the liturgy and union with God that finds a convergence between the experience of the liturgy and the practice of prayer, rather than some kind of incompatibility.

The term ‘mystical theology’ is first found as the title of the shortest treatise in the Dionysian corpus. Certainly with the revival of interest in this treatise in the later Middle Ages, manifest most obviously for English speakers in the translation of the treatise as *Deonise Hid Divinite* by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it came to be seen as a treatise about a form of prayer that bypassed the rational intellect. As it is put in *The Cloud*: ‘Because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking neither’ (‘For whi he may wel be loued, bot not pouȝt. By loue may he be getyn & holden; bot bi pouȝt neiper.’ *Cloud*, 6; Hodgson 1944: 26). A decisive step in Dionysian studies was made by Paul Rorem in a seminal paper in the 1980s, which pointed out that the language describing Moses’s ascent of Mount Sinai in chapter 1 of *Mystical Theology* is drawn not from the Septuagint, but from the liturgy: Moses is being presented as the archetype of the hierarch, not of the soul feeling after God in a cloud of unknowing, as presented in the medieval treatise of that name (Rorem 1989). Rorem’s suggestion should not have come as such a surprise, as several decades earlier it had been argued that the language of the ‘mystical’ is less concerned with what has come to be known as mysticism—at best, search for union with God in a practice of ever more simplified and simplifying prayer; at worst, as

strange experiences of levitation and clairvoyance—but with something much more deeply rooted in the experience of the Church.

THE MEANING OF THE ‘MYSTICAL’

In 1949, in the journal *La Vie spirituelle*, there appeared an article by Louis Bouyer, published in English as ‘“Mysticism”: An Essay on the History of a Word’ (Bouyer 1956).¹ In this article, Bouyer traced the use of *mystikos* in Greek patristic use (not ‘mysticism’, as in the uncomprehending English translation). The word, and its cognates, is onomatopoeic, the root *my-* suggesting closed lips, something hidden, silently acknowledged; its origin is without question in the Greek mysteries, but Bouyer maintained that this had had no substantial influence on the Christian use of the term, mostly because for Christians their concern is with the mystery of Christ: a mystery hidden from before the ages, but manifest in the incarnate Christ, and which, even manifest, still remains hidden, because it is beyond human comprehension (cf. Mark 4: 11, Col. 1: 26, 2: 2; Eph. 3: 9; 1 Cor. 2: 7). The sense of the hiddenness of the mystery of Christ is the primary reference for the Christian use of the word *mystikos* (μυστικός). How do we know the mystery of Christ? How is it declared? Primarily in the scriptures: the mystery of Christ is the key to the scriptures, the hidden meaning of both the Old and New Testaments. Overwhelmingly, the use of the word *mystikos* in the Fathers refers to the hidden meaning of the scriptures, the deeper meaning, *mystikos nous* (μυστικός νοῦς). Closely related to that meaning, we find throughout the early centuries a use that refers to what it is that is revealed by the scriptures: the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, are regularly referred to as *mystikos*, *mystikoteros* (μυστικώτερος), for these mysterious doctrines remain hidden, because beyond human comprehension. It is these mysteries, which the scriptures unfold, that we participate in through the sacraments, for which the Greek is the mysteries, τὰ μυστήρια: in the eucharist, as we are united body and soul to Christ’s body, we participate in his divinity, we share in the divine life of love that belongs to and flows from the Trinity. A further meaning, derived from these two primary meanings, refers to the hidden, inner life of the baptized Christian, the life ‘hid with Christ in God’, as the Apostle Paul put it in his epistle to the Colossians (3: 3). This third meaning is not, however, separate from these other two designations: the inner meaning of the scriptures and of the sacramental mysteries. The hidden life of the Christian is nourished by pondering on the scriptures and by participation in the divine mysteries. Bouyer insists that there is here a hierarchy of meaning: first of all, μυστικός referring to the mystery of Christ ‘hidden in God throughout the ages’ (Eph. 3: 9) and now manifest in Christ; secondly, *mystikos* referring to the means by which we participate in Christ—through the scriptures and the eucharist; and finally, the hidden, inner life of the Christian, nourished by pondering on the scriptures and their deeper meaning, and by

¹ Editor’s note: Much of this section originally appeared in Louth 2018.

participation in the sacraments, is called *mystikos*. Most modern talk of ‘mysticism,’ Bouyer implies, isolates this last use, severing it from its roots, and turns the mystical into a search for union with God on the part of the individual. Recovery of the pristine sense of the mystical opens up a sense of the mystical that is not detached from dogma, but founded on the dogmatic truths of the Christian tradition; not indifferent to Church organization, hierarchy, and sacraments, but rooted in the structured life of the Church; not individualistic, but growing out of the experience of the eucharistic community. It is this that we shall explore in this chapter.

THE NATURE OF THE LITURGICAL MYSTERY

If the mystical is rooted in the liturgical mystery, then we must first ask after the nature of this liturgical mystery. What is the eucharist? What is the root from which the mystical springs? In what is still a fundamentally important work on the liturgy, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dom Gregory Dix had this to say:

The unity (rather than ‘union’) of the church’s eucharist with the sacrifice of Christ by Himself is one consequence of the general pre-Nicene insistence on the unity of Christ with the church, of the Head with the members, in one indivisible organism. We have noted Irenaeus’ picturesque phrase that in her oblation ‘that poor widow the church casts in all her *life* into the treasury of God.’ The church corporately, through the individual offertory by each member for himself or herself personally, offers itself to God at the offertory under the forms of bread and wine, as Christ offered Himself, a pledged Victim to the Father at the last supper. The Body of Christ, the church, offers itself to *become* the sacrificed Body of Christ, the sacrament, in order that thereby the church itself may become within time what in eternal reality it is before God—the ‘fulness’ or ‘fulfilment’ of Christ; and each of the redeemed may ‘become’ what he has been made by baptism and confirmation, a living member of Christ’s Body... As Augustine was never tired of repeating to his African parishioners in his sermons, ‘So the Lord willed to impart His Body, and His Blood which He shed for the remission of sins. If you have received well, you *are* that which you have received.’ ‘Your mystery is laid on the table of the Lord, your mystery you receive. To that which you are you answer “Amen,” and in answering you assent. For you hear the words “the Body of Christ” and you answer “Amen.” Be a member of the Body of Christ that the Amen may be true.’ (Dix 1945: 247)

There are several points made by Dix that need underlining. First, this paragraph opens a section called ‘The Eucharist as Action,’ for it is an important point, frequently made by Dix, that the eucharist is not primarily a set of words, a text, but rather an *action*. So far as we know, in the early centuries there was no ‘text’ of the eucharistic prayer, the bishop (or priest) prayed extempore; in so far as anything was settled, it was the *action* of the

eucharist, the action that Dix sought to elucidate (perhaps in an over-prescriptive manner) in the book he significantly called *The Shape of the Liturgy*. This, secondly, leads on to the question: Whose action? Who is it who acts in the liturgy? The quotation from Dix makes it clear that it is Christ himself who acts in the liturgy; the Church, and its members, share in this action insofar as they are caught up by Christ in his action. *Corpus Christi*, the body of Christ, means both the body of Jesus that was sacrificed on the cross and rose from the dead *and* the Church as the body of Christ, of which Christ is the head. Dix remarks, 'the unity of Christ and the church is not something achieved (though it is intensified) in communion; it underlies the whole action from start to finish' (Dix 1945: 247). There is an interplay, amounting almost to identity, between the two meanings of the body of Christ: 'As the *anamnesis* of the passion, the eucharist is perpetually *creative* of the church, which is the fruit of the passion' (Dix 1945: 248): a formulation which perhaps expresses the truth more precisely than the assertion, popular in ecumenical circles, that 'The Eucharist makes the Church' (McPartlan 1993: title, but see 75–97).

The liturgical mystery is, then, an action: an action performed by *Christ*. As the priest says in the prayer before the Great Entrance in the Byzantine liturgy:

Do not turn away your face from me, nor reject me from among your children, but count me, your sinful and unworthy servant, worthy to offer these gifts to you. *For you are the one who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed, Christ our God...*

Christ is the sacrificial victim and the priest who offers; he is the One who receives the sacrifice, and the one distributed to the people in the Holy Gifts. If, then, the eucharist is the central liturgical mystery, then what we mean by union with God, even mystical union, is in some way constituted by the divine liturgy. Several consequences follow from this: first of all, in seeking union with God, what we are seeking already exists, and is created and constituted, by Christ. Christ, in offering himself to the Father, catches us up in his movement to the Father, a movement that is the counterpart of his becoming one with us in the incarnation and the cross; it is this that takes place in the celebration of the eucharist. Union with God is, then, given, rather than discovered; what we discover, what we seek for, already exists: we seek to realize in our lives what is already the case. Secondly, all that is involved in realizing and experiencing the union with God manifest in Christ in some way relates to the eucharist.

THE EUCHARISTIC ACTION

For Dionysios the Areopagite, the one who introduced into Christian theology the term *mystical theology*, the eucharist, and indeed all the sacramental rites, are first and foremost actions. He begins his account of the eucharist, or as he calls it the '*synaxis*

[gathering together] or communion', a service, he remarks, that accompanies virtually any 'hierarchical rite [*telete*, or initiation]', by describing the way in which the church is censed by the bishop or 'hierarchy':

The hierarchy, having completed the sacred prayer at the divine altar, begins the censuring by proceeding from it into the whole area of the sacred place, and having completed it returns again to the sacred altar and begins the singing together of the sacred melody of the psalms... (EH 3.2: Heil and Ritter 1991: 80.8–11)

The meaning of the circular censuring of the interior of the church, from and back to the altar, is given thus:

For the thearchic blessedness, which transcends all, if it proceeds in divine goodness to communion with the sacred ones who participate in it, yet it never goes outside its essentially unmoved state and foundation, and gives radiance to everyone deiform, each in their measure (*analogos*), being always secure in itself, in no way departing from its proper identity. So too the divine rite of the *synaxis*, although having a unique, simple, and enfolded beginning [or principle: *arche*], out of love for human kind is multiplied into a sacred manifold of symbols, reaching out through the whole range of hierarchic depiction of images, but from these gathering them together in a unifying way into its own unity (*monada*), making those whom it has sacredly raised up to itself one. (EH 3.3.3: Heil and Ritter 1991: 82.17–83.3)

The initial ceremony of censuring the church by the bishop expresses the fundamental meaning of the eucharistic liturgy, which is one of reaching out into multiplicity and drawing everything back into union. Behind this is the basic Neoplatonic movement from rest, through procession, and back again through return: the fundamental rhythm that Dionysios finds in the eucharist. Mostly Dionysios expresses all this in abstract terms, derived from his Neoplatonic contemporaries, but nevertheless he intimates the specifically Christian context of his reflections, commenting a little earlier that if we proceed 'to the causes in accordance with our sacred *synaxis*, we shall see, with Jesus lighting the way, the comely contemplation of the intelligible realm, which radiantly makes manifest the blessed beauty of the archetypes' (EH 3.3.2: Heil and Ritter 1991: 82.7–9).

METAPHYSICAL . . . AND COSMIC

In giving this abstract, philosophically inspired account of the divine liturgy, Dionysios is setting the liturgical action in a metaphysical context, or, if you like, in a cosmic context. We are not simply concerned with a service taking place among Christians in a place, at a time, but rather seeing this local and particular celebration as connected with the whole of created reality, with the very essence and nature of things.

Dionysios, as all know, developed an elaborate vision of the created cosmos, with an invisible realm of celestial beings, ordered in three threefold ranks, and a visible realm of human beings, organized in a church, arranged itself in threefold ranks, and participating in the source of all through sacred rites, again arranged three-by-three. The threeness we constantly encounter in Dionysios has less, it seems to me, to do with the Divine Trinity, than with the way in which threeness expresses relationship: one thing, another, and what relates them. This threeness is also expressed in terms of ‘hierarchy’, a term that Dionysios himself coined, which should therefore be understood in his own terms, rather than in terms of its modern sociological sense as expressing rank and subordination. Dionysios defines hierarchy as ‘in my view’ (*kat’ eme*) ‘a sacred order and knowledge and activity that assimilates to the deiform as far as is possible and analogously leads up with the enlightenments bestowed on it from God to imitation of God’ (*CH* 3.1; Heil and Ritter 1991: 17.3–5). Hierarchy is one of the aspects of that reaching out from the One towards the manifold, out of love for humankind (*philanthropia*), that we have seen is the central concern, for Dionysios, of the divine liturgy. These hierarchies, we learn too from Dionysios, operate by means of a threefold action of purification, illumination, and union or deification (*katharsis*, *photismos*, *henosis/theosis*). For Dionysios these operations are something that we undergo, that are administered to us by others: they entail community; they cannot, for Dionysios at least, be reduced to self-operated therapy.

SYMBOLISM

There is another element of the Areopagite’s metaphysical and cosmic vision that needs to be made explicit. In the passage quoted, Dionysios speaks of the ‘unique and simple *arche*’, out of love for mankind, being multiplied in a ‘sacred manifold of symbols’, and reaching out ‘through the whole range of hierarchic depiction of images’. The presence in the multiplicity of the cosmos of the divine love originating in the ultimate simplicity of God is manifest in symbols and images. This is a fundamental principle for Dionysios; as he puts it elsewhere, ‘truly visible things are manifest images of the invisible’ (*Ep.* 10; Heil and Ritter 1991: 208, 9–10). For Dionysios the visible discloses invisible reality, which itself finds expression, makes itself accessible, through the visible. The movement of God’s love from the invisible to the visible evokes a response from the visible beings of the cosmos which seeks to move from the visible to the invisible. There are various ways of expressing this interface between the invisible and the visible, but central for the Areopagite are beauty and love. Beauty, for Dionysios following Plotinus and those inspired by him, is less about symmetry, as with classical ideals of beauty, than about the way in which visible beings impart a sense of higher reality: visible beauty imparts a kind of radiance that has its origin in the realm of the invisible—such a sense of beauty is manifest, pre-eminently, in the face, the countenance. And this beauty calls out (Dionysios is aware of the etymology, found in Plato, that derives *kallos*, beauty, from the verb *kalein*, to call), and evokes from those who behold it a response of love. A further element concerned with interpreting this passage from God to creature, and from

creature to God, are what Dionysios calls the ‘apophatic’, concerned with denial, and the ‘kataphatic’, concerned with affirmation. Symbols express within the visible realm the truth of the invisible realm, that is, for Dionysios, not only God, but also the celestial beings, angels, and such like. Interpretation of the symbols involves both the kataphatic, the affirmation of what they express, and the apophatic, the denial that what we make of the symbol exhausts the meaning of the symbol. The danger of being lost in the realm of the symbolic is so great that Dionysios asserts that the apophatic is more true than the kataphatic. The interplay of apophatic and kataphatic is not a dialectic, as if the apophatic applied a corrective to the kataphatic—a kind of conceptual tacking in piloting the spiritual journey—rather the apophatic is fundamental; it undergirds the kataphatic, rather than merely correcting it.

Thus, concisely (perhaps all too concisely) are the elements of Dionysios’ spiritual and theological vision of the created order. They are the essential conceptual tools for exploring the resonance of the liturgical mystery for Dionysios and for those touched by his vision.

MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR ON THE DIVINE LITURGY

Dionysios’ understanding of the eucharistic mystery, its meaning and ramifications, was to have an immense influence throughout the succeeding centuries. A seminally important, and for the Byzantine and Orthodox tradition very nearly determinative, example of this development is the meditation on the divine liturgy found in the treatise of Maximos the Confessor, known as the *Mystagogia* (itself a term for the eucharist). The central part of the work is a commentary on the various ceremonies of the eucharist (parts of which were incorporated in the *Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation*, probably better translated as ‘What happens in church and its inner meaning’, attributed to Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople, which became a preface to the priest’s service book in the Byzantine tradition). More important for our purposes are the introductory and concluding chapters. The introductory chapters set up a series of analogies between the Church and the eucharist. These ‘metaphysical’ chapters that begin the *Mystagogia* sketch out a series of parallels, based on the structure of the church building, itself modelled on the function of the Church as a community that reflects the activity of God himself. God has brought everything into being, and ‘contains, gathers and limits them and in his providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and one another’ (*Mystagogia* 1; Boudignon 2011: ll. 133–5; Berthold 1985: 186). This is reflected in the Church which is

shown to be active among us in the same way as God, as an image reflects its archetype. For many, and of nearly boundless number, are the men, women and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by race and language, by way of life and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and

customs, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics and habits: all are born into the Church and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit. To all in equal measures it gives and bestows one divine form and designation: to be Christ's and to bear his name.

(*Myst.* 1; Boudignon 2011: ll. 163–74; Berthold 1985: 187, modified)

This uniting function is manifest in the structure of the church building, Maximos goes on to argue, for the division between nave and sanctuary is there to indicate the way in which those drawn into the church—into the nave—are orientated towards the sanctuary. The two parts are closely related; indeed, Maximos says, the church is not properly speaking divided into the two parts, rather the two parts of the church are defined by their relationship, so that ‘the nave is potentially the sanctuary since it is a holy place by reason of its relationship to the goal of mystagogy, and the sanctuary is actually the nave, since it is there that the process of its own mystagogy begins’ (*Myst.* 2; Boudignon 2011: ll. 223–5). The division between nave and sanctuary is further reflected, Maximos argues, in the division between the visible and invisible parts of the cosmos (*Myst.* 2); in the division within the visible cosmos between earth and heaven (*Myst.* 3); in the division within the human between body and soul (*Myst.* 4); in the division within the soul between the contemplative and the active activities of the soul (*Myst.* 5). There follow two further chapters outlining how the scriptures can be said to be a human being (body and soul reflected in the Old and New Testaments, or in the distinction between literal and spiritual exegesis: the analogy between scripture and the human goes back to Origen), and how the cosmos itself can be seen as a human being, and vice versa.

THE HUMAN BEING AS CHURCH

The longest of these chapters is that which reflects on the way in which the division in the church between nave and sanctuary is reflected in the human soul. And this is prepared for in chapter 4, which, though it is said to be about the church as reflected in the human so we expect the division into nave and sanctuary to be reflected in the division between body and soul, in fact presents something more complex. For Maximos presents us with a threefold division: body matching the nave, the soul the sanctuary, and the intellect or *nous* matching the *thusiasterion*, or altar. This is because—as well as the parallel between the church and the human—there is an even more fundamental relationship between God and the human, for the human is created in the image and likeness of God. It is this more fundamental likeness that is worked through in chapter 5, where Maximos discusses at length the way in which the contemplative and active operations of the soul lead the soul to the apprehension of God by inculcating capacities for truth, perceived by the contemplative faculty, and goodness, pursued by the active faculty. He traces a way in which there are five pairs of qualities—therefore ten in all—involved in bringing the soul to truth and goodness. The contemplative faculty,

which he was told is also called the intellect or *nous* (Maximos presents this chapter explicitly as the teaching of his *geron*, his spiritual elder), passes from wisdom, through contemplation, knowledge (*gnosis*), enduring knowledge (*aleston gnosis*), and finally truth; while the active faculty, also called *logos*, passes from moral wisdom (*phronesis*), through practice (*praxis*, ascetic struggle), virtue, and faith, finally reaching goodness. He speaks of these ten as the strings of a lyre that can be played to produce harmonious melody in praise of God. He emphasizes that they exist in pairs; one needs to pursue not just vision, but practical goodness. Ultimately, there is no truth without goodness, no goodness without truth. The whole chapter is full of allusive teaching, presented as the teaching of his *geron*, that he is passing on, without, perhaps, having fully plumbed its depths himself.

THE ONTOLOGICAL LEVEL

One might wonder what this lengthy chapter on the spiritual life is doing in a work ostensibly on the structure and meaning of the divine liturgy. That it is more than a digression is clear from the way in which the concluding chapters (23 and 24) pick up something of the same approach. Perhaps Maximos's point becomes clearer if we remind ourselves of his teaching in what could be regarded as a companion work of mystagogy, his *On the Lord's Prayer*. There we see how important the ontological is for Maximos, how virtue is seen by him as laying bare the natural, rather than being concerned with patterns of behaviour (which involves a revision of what is meant by virtue, *arete*; Maximos's notion that virtue is natural is, I think, a deliberate corrective of Aristotle for whom virtue is ethical, a matter of *ethos*, custom or habit). It is this insistence on the ontological that makes the parallels that he draws in the introductory chapters of the *Mystagogia* more than striking parallels. Because Maximos is concerned with the ontological, the parallels he draws are real, not just imaginative. It is as if what takes place in the church building—pre-eminently the divine liturgy—echoes throughout the created order, the visible cosmos, the human, and the human soul. The liturgical action is not just echoed, however. The bringing to union, or reconciliation, that Maximos emphasizes in the first chapter as the fundamental way in which the church in its activity reflects God and his activity in the world is actually advanced, fostered, by the divine liturgy, which recapitulates the reconciliation achieved by Christ in his incarnation, cross, and resurrection. And all this is worked through from the remotest points of the cosmos to the depths of the individual soul. For that to be achieved, it is essential that each Christian soul work out in itself the reconciliation represented in the divine liturgy. Lars Thunberg, one of the greatest of Maximian scholars, once remarked of Maximos: 'he often constructed his sentences like Chinese boxes, which have to be opened slowly and with undisturbed attention, to reach the final truth he wanted to communicate to his readers' (Thunberg 1985: 29). Anyone who has tried to translate Maximos's works will recognize the truth of that. But it is not just sentences: it seems to me that these prefatory

chapters of the *Mystagogia* are like Chinese boxes, each of which can only be understood in relation to the others. As we turn them round, one inside the other, we begin to see how the cosmic relates to the historical, and both to the depths of the soul (the ‘psychological’—except that that word has become trivialized in English). Two of these boxes are crucial: the liturgical and the personal. In chapter 4 Maximos gives a vision of how the two can come together:

And again he said that in another manner of contemplation the holy Church of God is a human being, having the sanctuary as its soul, the divine altar as its intellect, and the nave as its body, existing as an image and likeness of the human who has come into being in the image and likeness of God. By means of the nave, as through the body, it proposes moral wisdom, while by means of the sanctuary, as through the soul, it spiritually interprets natural contemplation and by means of the intellect of the divine altar it manifests mystical theology. Conversely, the human is a mystical church, because through the nave of the body it is brightened in virtue by the active force of the soul through the observance of the commandments according to ethical philosophy; through the sanctuary of the soul with the principles of sense purely cut off from matter in the spirit it is conveyed to God by reason in natural contemplation; while through the altar of the intellect it is summoned by the silence of Godhead in the innermost shrine abounding in songs of an unseen and unknown mighty sound through another silence, rich in speech and tone; and as far as is possible to humans, in accordance with mystical theology it is united in kinship with [the Godhead], becomes such as is possible for one made worthy of the indwelling of God, and is marked with his dazzling splendour.

(*Myst.* 4; Boudignon 2011: ll. 264–84; Berthold 1985: 189–90, much modified)

DIVISIONS OF BEING

Something like the parallels invoked in the early chapters of the *Mystagogia* is found elsewhere in Maximos’s works, notably in *Ambiguum* 41. Here these divisions are unmistakably ontological: divisions of being (which inspired Eriugena, Maximos’s Latin translator, and his notion of *divisiones naturae*, divisions of nature). The ‘divisions of being’ are: first, between the uncreated nature and created nature; secondly, within created nature, between the intelligible and the sensible; thirdly, within sensible nature, between heaven (or sky) and earth; fourthly, within earthly nature, between paradise and the inhabited world (*oikoumene*); and fifth and finally, within the inhabited world (or rather its human inhabitants), between male and female. The last nature to be divided, the human (*anthropos*), is described as being ‘above all—like a most capacious workshop containing all things, naturally mediating through himself all the divided extremes, and who by design has been beneficially placed amid beings’ (*Amb.* 41: Constans 2014: ii. 105). The whole of reality is, then, characterized by division, *diairesis*. The first ‘division’ is not a division within any all-embracing reality; it is incomprehensible and can only be called *agnoia*, ignorance (maybe unknowing). The

other divisions are all divisions within an existing reality: the created order divided into the invisible and the visible, the visible into heaven and earth, earth into paradise and the inhabited world, and the human into male and female. These divisions are held together by the human, *anthropos*, who acts as mediator, embracing what appear as polar opposites.

These divisions of being articulate the finitude and multiplicity that characterizes the created world. It is this finitude and multiplicity that underlies the symbolic nature of created reality that we have already noticed. As Karl Rahner puts it, in an essay that approaches the theology of the symbol from a rather different perspective from this one, 'all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily "express" themselves in order to attain their own nature', and a little later,

[t]o reach the primary concept of symbol, we must start from the fact that all beings (each of them, in fact) are multiple, and are or can be essentially the expression of another in this unity of the multiple and one in this plurality, by reason of its plural unity. The first part of this assertion is axiomatic in an ontology of the finite. Each finite being as such bears the stigma of the finite by the very fact that it is not absolutely 'simple.' (Rahner 1966: 224, 225–6)

Whether it is proper to call the inevitable multiplicity of the finite a 'stigma' one may doubt. It certainly seems that the 'divisions' that characterize created, finite reality are, so far as Maximos is concerned, neutral, or perhaps ambivalent. These divisions characterize the finite nature of created reality; they make possible the beauty of the created order, which is symbolic and entails multiplicity. In this respect, these divisions are constitutive of the beauty of created reality: that creation of which God said at the end of the sixth day that it is *kala lian*, 'exceedingly beautiful'. Nevertheless, these divisions can become fissures, opening up gulfs of unmeaning. Another way of putting this would be to observe that created reality is characterized by *diastema*, distance, which is a consequence of its being finite, both in space and in time; finite beings are separate from each other *by being finite*, there is distance between them, both spatially and temporally, the temporal distance being manifest, perhaps, more in terms of inwardness, while spatial distance defines our separate identities (indeed *diastema* is even more intimately involved in the created condition than limiting it to space and time might suggest: see Louth 2009). This can be illustrated in the case of the fifth division, that between the sexes. Such a division or distinction lies at the root of some of the most intense and most enduring delights that humans can know, but it is also the case that the distinction between the sexes can underlie the deepest and most heart-breaking suffering that humans can know. The distance, implicit in sexual distinction, opens up both possibilities. The acknowledgement of this distance can be a positive liberation; the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, spoke of trying, even in the intimate relationship of marriage, to 'love the distance between them', thus opening up the possibility of seeing 'each other in the wholeness of their Form and before the greatness of heaven' (Rilke 1950: 29). But an uncomprehending longing to overcome this distance can generate a sense of separation, remoteness, and incomprehension, destructive of any relatedness.

DIVISIONS THAT ESTRANGE . . . AND ARE UNITED IN CHRIST

For Maximos these divisions, set in place to enrich the created order, are meant to be held together by the human, in his role as mediator, made possible by his being created in the image of God. Instead, however, of living in accordance with nature (*physikos*), around the unmoved source of his being, the human has contrary to nature (*para physin*) focused his life on what is lower than himself, for the sake of himself. Instead of acknowledging God as the centre of all, he has accepted the pretence that he, the creature, is the centre of all, and is no longer able to fulfil his cosmic destiny. So God moved immovably and himself made the human the centre of his movement, thus becoming human, in order

after He had united through Himself the natural fissures (*rhegmata*) running through the general nature of the universe, and had revealed the universal preexisting principles of the parts (through which the union of what is divided naturally comes about)—to fulfil the great purpose of God the Father, *recapitulating all things, both in heaven and on earth, in Himself, in whom they also had been created.*

(*Amb.* 41; Constans 2014: 109–11)

The divisions are transcended through his virginal conception (division 5), through his uniting the inhabited world with paradise in his words to the thief on the cross (division 4), through his uniting heaven and earth in the Ascension (division 3), through his passing body and soul into heaven, in the same mystery (division 2), and finally, appearing in his humanity before the face of God the Father, uniting the created and the uncreated.

ESCHATOLOGY NOW

And yet: we live in a world still marked by these divisions. How can they said to have been healed by the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Christ? One of the most striking features of Maximos's treatment of the eucharist in his *Mystagogia* is that the very first action of the divine liturgy—the entrance of the bishop into the church and his passing through the doors into the sanctuary—is said to depict in symbolic form 'the ascension [of Christ] into the heavens and his ascent to the throne above the heavens and the restoration [of all things] (*apokatastasis*)' (*Mystagogia* 8; Boudignon 2011; ll. 616–17). For Maximos, therefore, the whole action of the eucharist takes place the other side of the Second Coming, or at least in immediate anticipation of it. We should hardly be surprised

at Maximos's perception here, for, as the priest says in the *anamnesis* in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom:

Remembering therefore this our Saviour's command and all that has been done for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting at the right hand, the Second and glorious Coming again . . .

The action of the eucharist is understood as taking place beyond the Second Coming of Christ, which is remembered, part of the *anamnesis*. This has profound implications for our understanding not only of the action of the eucharist but also of the nature of our living out the mystery of Christ in our lives. Earlier, I noted that the eucharistic action is performed by Christ: 'For you are the one who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed, Christ our God' (words taken from an early-fifth-century homily for Holy Thursday by Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria and uncle of Cyril). In the eucharist it is Christ who acts: Christ, as the one who is coming (*ho erchomenos*)—who is coming in his Kingdom, in each celebration of the divine liturgy. This is stressed in the Byzantine liturgy, which begins with the priest's exclamation, 'Blessed the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' This theme—or *leitmotiv*—of the Kingdom echoes throughout the liturgy: at the Great Entrance we pray for various categories of people 'to be remembered in the Kingdom'; in the Lord's Prayer, we pray 'Your Kingdom come'; and in the prayers before receiving the Holy Gifts, we take on our lips the prayer of the thief, crucified with Christ, 'Remember me, Lord, in your Kingdom.' It is Christ, who is coming from the final consummation of all things, whom we encounter in the eucharist, as the one who performs the eucharistic action. In truth, the eucharist comes to us *from the future*, performed by One who has accomplished everything, and whose Second Coming is anticipated in the eucharistic action. But so, too, is the life of the Christian, which is rooted in the eucharistic action and is nurtured by it. We tend to think of the Christian life—especially if we dignify it by calling it the 'spiritual life', or the 'mystical life'—as a search for God. But think of Pascal's words: *Console-toi, tu ne chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais trouvé*—'Comfort yourself, you would not be searching for me if you had not found me' (*Pensées*, 751; Sellier 1976: 447), or perhaps better: 'you would not be searching for me if I had not found you.' In the divine liturgy, he who is coming is coming to us; as priest and victim, receiving the sacrifice and giving himself in the Holy Gifts, he makes his way to us. Another *leitmotiv* of the Byzantine liturgy is holiness: the long pause in the liturgy before we embark on the readings, represented by the singing of the *Trisagion*, which is picked up again in the Song of the Great Entrance when, as images of the cherubim, we lay aside all earthly cares and share with the Cherubim in the thrice-holy hymn; the joining with the cherubim themselves in the *Sanctus*; the exclamation before the fraction and Holy Communion—'The holy things for the holy'; leading to the words of the deacon as he brings the chalice with the Holy Gifts to the people: 'With fear of God, in faith and love, draw near!' Fear before the holiness of God: fear that we are ourselves being drawn into the realm of the holy—a holiness that

transforms and transfigures us. And this happens as we encounter the Holy One, who is coming. As we approach him—in fear, faith, and love—to become what we receive, to become Christ our God. This is the heart of the liturgical mystery: the mystery we embrace, or rather become, in receiving it.

THE APOPHATIC NATURE OF THE EUCHARIST

My early references to the divine liturgy, when I recalled how Dionysios the Areopagite presents the action of the eucharist, drew attention to the movement of the liturgy, first of all, the circular movement of the censuring of the church in a great circle, leading out from the sanctuary and back again to the sanctuary, symbolizing the movement of God's love, out to the furthest reaches of the created order, and back again, enfolding all in that love. The emphasis on movement, rather than on words, whether of hymn or prayers, draws attention to the fundamentally apophatic character of the divine liturgy: as something that escapes words, that leaves words far behind. In that movement we feel our way into the divine mystery, a mystery that transforms us and draws us into the divine unity—into the true mystical union of the whole of creation with God.

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CHAPTER 8

MYSTICS AS TEACHERS

JOANNE MAGUIRE

TEACHERS inform, direct, instruct, and persuade. They impart knowledge and ways of thinking, and they often guide individuals towards intellectual, moral, physical, or spiritual transformation. Teachers who are also mystics aim at accomplishing those goals in the service of perhaps the greatest challenge of all: enabling individuals to enter into the presence of God. Mystical experience ushers in a profound change of identity, and many individuals achieve such deep change only with the help of a teacher or guide who has experienced such change him or herself. But how does this happen? Studying any situation of teaching and learning requires one pay attention to matters of content, motivations, context, and approach, or the what, why, and how of teaching. Who is a teacher? What is to be learned? For what reason(s) does a mystic teach? How is information or inspiration presented? This chapter assumes that all teaching and learning is informed by historical context, but it also notes that teaching for these mystical teachers is understood as teaching unchanging truth. This chapter does not focus on the complexities of understanding texts as teachers, a theme taken up in Chapter 12 of this volume.

Mystical teachers employ pedagogical and rhetorical strategies that fit their contexts, despite their claims that what they know cannot be expressed and must be experienced to be understood. Against this and other limitations, they regularly undertake to show how and why another person might prepare for such an experience. Some do so in practical terms more suited to rote learning, while others engage in more innovative and daring methods, asking students to risk their identity as particular selves. In short, there is no one mystical curriculum or pedagogical approach, although much of the content and methods is rooted firmly in traditional doctrines and practices. These styles cross boundaries and take in both individual and communal approaches. This chapter examines mystics as teachers primarily through the lens of sources, authority, and methods, all derived from and modelled on God, understood as the only true teacher. Mystics who teach understand themselves as mediators of divine mystery. The tradition of Christian mystical literature is long and varied, but it coheres around an essential truth: those who are true mystics are those who teach, thereby enabling others to be transformed

by their teachings. This essential truth is in tension with another truth: God is the true teacher, and human teachers and books are but mediators of God's truth.

The word 'teach' derives from Old English *taecan* meaning to point out or demonstrate, and it is etymologically related to the word for sign or mark. Associated words include educate, instruct, indoctrinate, and discipline, words that have very different connotations if perhaps similar goals. 'Educate', for instance, derives from the Latin 'to lead out', while 'instruct' derives from 'upon, toward' and 'pile up'. Most broadly, teachers enable others to learn what is, for whatever reason in a particular context, worth knowing. Whether this is done through transmission of facts or through facilitation of awareness of innate knowledge, the goal is transformation of the student (and, often, the teacher as well). Keeping these etymologies in mind is useful when thinking about mystical teaching, a teaching that so often points to something that cannot be directly apprehended but that can be approached through ascetic and other disciplinary practices, intuition, or contemplation. It is likely, too, that much of what is learned by students is 'not taught but caught', in the words of Benedicta Ward in her study of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Ward 1975: p. xxi), although that dynamic is of necessity beyond the scope of this study. For the purposes of this chapter, mystical teaching is defined as intentional transmission or drawing out of ideas and knowledge that aims at profound transformation, and mystical learning is the acquisition of potentially transformative knowledge and practice through particular methods of disciplining the body, the mind, and the soul.

There are many ways Christians engage in pedagogy, such as through preaching, catechesis, spiritual direction, and formal schooling. Mystical teaching overlaps with and partakes of elements of each of those modes. Both preaching and teaching can involve spiritual direction, and spiritual direction necessarily involves teaching. Both teaching and preaching can be expository or extemporaneous (or a mix of both), while catechesis and mystical teaching are often a more lengthy process that follows a strict itinerary or curriculum aiming to bring students along by stages to a defined goal. Preaching is almost always presented orally, while catechesis and mystical teaching can be done in person or through a text; similarly, formal schooling often relies on both lecture and discussion and, often, assigned texts. Spiritual direction generally focuses on one-on-one interaction and tailoring of a message to a particular individual, although the audiences for spiritual directors' and mystical teachers' texts are often quite broad once set in writing. Mystical teaching is perhaps best distinguished from preaching because it takes place over a longer period of time and is, in some essential way, cumulative. That said, teaching of any type, like preaching, does not reach all students, and the possible results of teaching include increased knowledge and new beliefs in the learner or continued ignorance or misunderstanding. No teacher can cause another to learn, but it is probable that both teacher and learner hope that each encounter contains the possibility of change or transformation. Mystical teaching partakes of various pedagogical modes but aims to go well beyond the transmission of knowledge or modes of practice: it aims at capturing and transmitting God's wisdom and truth, well beyond words, signs, and reason (Williams 1983).

HISTORY OF MYSTICAL TEACHING

Much has been written about Christian philosophies of education, such as those developed by the Jesuits beginning in the sixteenth century or by John Baptist de la Salle, founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. John Henry Newman (d. 1890), a convert from Anglicanism, is perhaps the most influential Roman Catholic writer on education, with *The Idea of the University* and several lecture series on education to his credit. These more formalized philosophies helped to undergird vast institutions whose mission is to provide Christian education even for those interested in secular work, a key factor that made them both more sustainable and distinct from the monastic schools that flourished in the Middle Ages. The professionalization of learning began with sophisticated medieval institutions and humanist schools of the Renaissance, which required accreditation of the institution, training of teachers, and established benchmarks for certification of students wanting to enter professions. The kinds of teaching discussed here are very different: they are not so formalized and are more like apprenticeships, where knowledge and experience are gained at the hand of a master of the craft. Those who receive the teaching of a mystical master are often close personal disciples, often formed into a group founded by a particular mystic or within a particular mystical tradition; others never knew the teacher personally but encounter their ideas in written form. This is often the case when a school of mystical thought forms around a charismatic founding teacher: Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Victorines, Ignatians, and others fit in this category. Mystical texts are written by both founders and disciples, as disciples would often serve as scribes. In some cases, lessons and guidance were recorded by an amanuensis who was tasked with forming sometimes disjointed accounts into coherent wholes, effectively making them teachers. Always, however, God is foremost in mystical thinking, because God is understood to be the true teacher.

More germane to this study than influential educational philosophies is the development of mystical theology as a reading practice. As Jean Leclercq has so ably recorded, the Benedictine tradition coalesced around the practice of *lectio divina*, the divine reading of scripture combined with meditation and prayer. Following the lead of Origen of Alexandria (d. third century), who saw Christ as the one through whom humans could unlock scriptural meaning, Benedict of Nursia (d. sixth century) developed *lectio divina* as one of the three pillars of life in a Benedictine monastery. This method of reading, with roots in Hebrew and Greek traditions, requires concentrated effort in reading the Bible in pursuit of contemplation of God. This practice developed into the four typical stages of *lectio divina* outlined by the Carthusian Guigo in the twelfth century: reading (*lectio*), reflection (*meditatio*), response (*oratio*), and rest in or contemplation of God (*contemplatio*). This practice continues throughout the Catholic tradition, being joined (and in some cases overshadowed) by *lectio spiritualis*, spiritual reading which downplays the text in favor of focus on the affectivity of the individual (Studzinski 2009: 173).

This seems to have been a natural development from a tradition that tended to evade questions about the role of the self in spiritual experience in favour of questions about scripture: as monks and lay people began thinking of the self, the self became a more central part of spirituality. Historian Brian Stock provides two illustrative examples of the difference between *lectio divina* and *lectio spiritualis*. He asks his readers to enter into the experience of *lectio divina* through a flight of imagination:

Suppose you are asked to repeat aloud a verse of the psalm with your eyes on the text and your mind fixed on the meanings of the words by means of verbal repetition. If you perform this task with attention, you will be close to the mediaeval discipline of *lectio divina*: you will be reading strenuously.

He then asks readers to enter into the world of *lectio spiritualis*:

With the sound of the text still reverberating in your ears, close your eyes and concentrate on the inner development of your own reflections, following them as they proceed in an associative manner from the meaning of the text to other pious thoughts... If you perform this task without permitting distractions, you will be close to *lectio spiritualis*. (Stock 2001: 105)

This move from outward to inward contemplation sidelined the Bible, allowing the texts of mystics to take centre stage in the lives of spiritual seekers. For much of the ensuing Catholic tradition, study of the Bible becomes the province of scholars whereas study of the self, often through the words of mystics, becomes the province of all potential seekers and allows mystics to share their hard-earned knowledge with others.

Mystics are those who have gained a broad appeal for their message with an audience hungry for their ideas; however, this situation relies strongly on the grace of God mixed with personal commitment and an ability to redirect the will if not the intellect. As Jean Leclercq notes in the Introduction to *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* presumes that 'the teacher and his pupils have received a God-given gift and personal grace' that permits fallen humans to know anything of worth (Leclercq 1982: 5). Bernard's discourse, Leclercq argues, 'is oriented not toward learning but toward spirituality'; in other words, the intellect is subordinate to the will (Leclercq 1982: 5). Yet not all are able to do the hard work of taming the will. As Bernard puts it in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*,

There we hear Wisdom teaching, here we welcome it within us. There we are instructed, here touched: instruction makes learned men, contact makes wise men. The sun does not warm all of those on whom it shines: many of those who are taught what they must do by Wisdom are not equally inspired to do it.

(Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Songs of Songs* 23.14,
as quoted in Leclercq 1982: 214)

The history of mystical teaching shows that human teachers help to prepare students with knowledge of God in order to set a foundation for a personal experience of God.

Whatever pedagogies are employed to bring disciples to come to know God, it is direct experience of God that makes those teachings meaningful. Theologians can teach the finer points of the theological tradition by drawing on traditional sources and genres; mystics can point the way to direct experience of the love of God. As Leclercq argues, mystical theology, unlike the more activist scholastic theology, is less concerned with the moment and more driven by the lifelong search for God. When Bernard of Clairvaux writes, ‘We read today in the book of experience,’ he is illustrating the centrality of the individual heart and soul, shifting the emphasis from scripture and the world to direct learning from God (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 3.1; Evans 1987: 221). Mystics seek to point the way.

The history of mystical teaching thus exhibits a tension between a need for teachers and books and an assumption that God can transform an individual directly, without external aids (Barrett 2011).¹ The tension is especially prominent in the study of mystical theology, where we must of necessity rely on textual sources to reconstruct mystical teaching and learning, despite the fact that texts tell only part of the complex story of mystical teaching and learning. This chapter proceeds fully in the knowledge that most mystical teaching, particularly in antiquity and the Middle Ages when written texts were relatively scarce, was likely done in person and that much is lost to interpersonal interaction that can never be reconstructed. Teaching and learning, after all, arise in various contexts, sometimes as the result of careful planning and intention and sometimes in the inspiration of the moment. Moreover, the teaching examined here often assumes an audience that might be wider than the person or group for whom it was originally written; for instance, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century) notes that although his work is tailored to one individual, it can be read with benefit from others who find themselves in a similar situation; in contrast, Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) warns away those who are unprepared for her difficult text, acknowledging that a range of readers might have access to her words. This study is focused by necessity on what was written in letters, treatises, and more explicitly didactic works that explicate ways to come to the presence of God. The categories here—sources, authority, contexts, and methods—admit of considerable overlap in practice.

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

Mystics who teach derive their knowledge and their lessons from within and without; that is, they have personal experience as well as exterior witness that buttresses their claims to be worthy of teaching others. But many also claim to have uncovered God within, indicating an internal and divine source of authority. Indeed, exterior sources and inner authority are often closely tied, as mystical teachers draw from both in

¹ John Douglas Barrett (2011) examines this unresolved tension specifically in the work of Fr Augustine Baker.

expressing their thoughts and devising their lessons. Mystics who teach engage in the public performance of an earned status, although some balk at the responsibility. In *On Loving God*, for instance, Bernard of Clairvaux introduces his text by noting that his monastic profession prepares him best to provide prayers rather than to answer questions, but he nevertheless agrees to answer questions about loving God with the caveat that he can only answer according to what God has told him. This tension suffuses inquiry into sources for mystical teaching. Most mystics argue that God can speak directly to the soul with proper preparation, thus mixing the possibility of discovering an inner truth and learning through exterior means. Because so much of the mystical journey is so challenging and often ineffable, those who are privy to the secret come to see themselves as responsible for teaching at least part of the way to those who wish to be initiated. A mystic who wants to guide others must figure out how to teach 'the wisdom which is hidden in the mystery', as Bernard of Clairvaux puts it, drawing from 1 Corinthians (Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 74; Evans 1987: 253), despite a deep sense of humility and unworthiness. Some are very straightforward about God's role in the mystical process: Hildegard of Bingen penned her *Scivias* in the twelfth century because God commanded her to, thus authorizing her words: 'And again I heard the voice from Heaven saying to me, "Speak therefore of these wonders, and, being so taught, write them and speak"' (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, Declaration; Hart and Bishop 1990: 59). Teaching about wisdom assumes a deep understanding of that wisdom, an understanding that is often thought to come from a source beyond the self.

As already mentioned and pursued further later, some thinkers argue that true knowledge abides within all human beings and merely needs to be drawn out, while others argue that external sources of knowledge are essential. Many authors mix the two. The earliest texts from the Desert Fathers show elders referring their followers to the scripture for answers, and scripture remains a key source for teaching throughout the history of the Church, such as in the practice of *lectio divina*. The desert texts also focus on personal experience and patterns of behaviour, arguing that the valid teacher is one who walks the walk. The Church and her traditions are also potent sources of authority, not least for interpreting scripture for followers. Many authors, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, keep close to ecclesiastical orthodoxy while also relying on the authority of their own experience. For others, these sources of authority take second place to God Himself as the ultimate authority and teacher. Accordingly, for Augustine, even scripture teaches us nothing: the best it can do is to prepare or direct us to look within. Human teachers are similar to scripture in this, as they are useful in the earliest stages of learning but cannot teach anything of substance and truth. For Augustine, the only true learning happens at the hands of the inner teacher, Christ, who is available to any student whose mind is properly disposed and open to learning. In this, Augustine follows in the footsteps of Plato (probably without direct influence) and Clement of Alexandria, both of whom argued that human teaching is second to teaching directly within the self, through the Logos.

This sentiment that God is the true teacher holds fast throughout the Christian tradition, particularly in the hands of the mystics studied in this volume. That there is

one true teacher is stated explicitly in the Gospel of Matthew: 'Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah' (Matt. 23: 10 NRSV; see also Matt. 23: 8). Aquinas and others draw on this line in their own thinking about education; for instance, Aquinas argues that God, as Wisdom, is the source and goal of all teaching and learning. Throughout the tradition it is understood that God shares His knowledge most fully with prophets, mystics, and others sufficiently prepared or singled out; those so chosen often understand themselves to be mere vessels for God's knowledge but thus capable of guiding others. This understanding of God as the master teacher finds its most elegant and succinct expression in Julian of Norwich's fifteenth-century *Showings*: 'he is the teaching, he is the end, he is the reward for which every living soul labours' (Julian of Norwich, *Showings* 2.34; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 236). Later authors, such as Jacob Boehme, declare that one can 'Pretend, cry, shout, sing, preach, teach as you will. If the internal teacher and hearer is not open, all is Babel and fable' (Boehme 6.18; Erb 1978: 163). Teresa of Avila takes a similar stance, noting that what she teaches is only what God has taught her and that anything novel she might say is from God, 'for I write as mechanically as birds taught to speak, which, knowing nothing but what is taught them and what they hear, repeat the same things again and again' (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* proem; Peers 1989: 24). Even if there is an element of rhetoric in this claim (Ahlgren 1996: 67–84), Teresa seems to believe that humans are mere vessels for divine ideas, and mystics position themselves as those who entreat God for lessons and then act as mediators of that knowledge for others. Ultimate authority never rests in a human teacher but rather in God and Jesus, the only true teachers.

The interplay between divine and human teaching and internally and externally acquired knowledge from sources such as classical or patristic literature is perhaps most fully explained by Augustine and then Aquinas, both of whom also recognized a need for human teachers. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), hailed as one who masterfully combined Greek ideals of education with Christian ideas and values, makes this the theme of *De Magistro*, in which he places himself in the role of teacher and his son, Adeodatus, in the role of precocious student. Augustine insists that we do not learn anything from words or signs, because we must first understand what a word or sign signifies in order to understand what is being said; consequently, understanding precedes the ways it is expressed or transmitted to others. 'When a sign is given to me, and it finds me not knowing the thing of which it is the sign, it cannot teach me; but if it finds me knowing the thing of which it is the sign, then what do I learn from the sign?' (Augustine, *De Magistro* 10.33; Mooney and Nowacki 2011: 93). Augustine here identifies a fundamental paradox of teaching: we teach and learn through signs (e.g. words), but signs are limited in use to those who understand them. They are also susceptible to translation, mistranslation, and mishearing. In short, signs are useful tools to point the way to true understanding but they cannot provide understanding. For Augustine, words point toward the world, but we learn from the world itself. Indeed, the teaching of understanding through language from one person to another is essentially impossible; nevertheless, illumination can be inspired by skilful teachers who know where to point. Fortunately,

God can use the human teachers who have mastered what is to be taught to aid in the spiritual path.

For Augustine, the initial necessary disposition of every student should be one of belief, which precedes all true understanding. Belief is a state of submission to authority, whether to human teachers or scripture. One first believes what one is told by authoritative others, and one then advances to understanding those things oneself. Thus, according to Augustine and Plato before him, teachers cannot produce learning or knowledge in students, and any transmission of knowledge is therefore only apparent: whatever understanding seems to have been gained is actually uncovered. For Augustine, the teacher (Christ) who resides in the soul and what is taught are identical: the teacher and student must both adapt their teaching to their students and recognize that a teacher can only help—but never cause—a student to turn towards God. Successful human teaching that leads each individual towards an experience of God is more a matter of proper directing. A human teacher is primarily a wayfinder, one who points another on the proper course, authorized to do so by God and endorsed by experience.

Aquinas picks up on these themes as he argues that God, as Wisdom, is the source and goal of all teaching, which is enacted by humans through the divine. Aquinas provides his readers with an extended consideration of teaching rather than a developed philosophy of education. For Aquinas, God is the sole source of knowledge that is expressed throughout creation, and those who are closest to God (e.g. angels) possess the greatest amount of divine knowledge; humans, due to their distance from God, possess far less. Article 1 of Aquinas's *De Magistro* asks, 'Can a human teach and be called a teacher, or just God alone?' His answer is essentially yes, but he adds a few important caveats. God, as creator of all, creates all learning; humans, as creatures, cannot be ultimately responsible for the learning that happens in a learner. All learning comes from pre-existing knowledge based on human capacities for reason, abstraction, and the ability to focus on what truly matters. In essence, then, God teaches directly and inwardly, while humans direct students to and in lessons, all of which is accomplished outwardly.

Questions of authority haunt mystical teaching, which is significantly complicated by common mystical claims to ineffability and apophysis.² The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is perhaps most instructive in this regard, as he offers an intellectual approach to God that insists that God is beyond every attempt to grasp Him by the intellect. As the *Cloud* author writes, 'When I say "darkness," I mean a privation of knowing, just as whatever you do not know or have forgotten is dark to you, because you do not see it with your spiritual eyes. For this reason, that which is between you and your God is termed, not a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 4; Walsh 1981: 128). As the text states, God 'can certainly be loved, but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 6; Walsh 1981: 130). So the *Cloud* author must express through words and reason what is beyond words and reason; he must instill a particular attitude toward life that must be carefully cultivated. And it is clear that the human author of this text is not the source of its apophatic

² On Gnosticism and teaching, see especially Kovacs (2001).

teachings; rather, the Holy Spirit leads the body and soul toward God, a movement that finds its origin in God the Father. The *Cloud* author emphasizes the importance of recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit: 'Try to be the wood and let it be the carpenter' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 34; Walsh 1981: 186–7). This emphasis on passivity, which is common in many books of mystical guidance, comes from a belief that the truth is within all human beings but that such a truth is beyond description or expression. That said, mystics do their best to overcome the limitations of language in leading others, positing themselves as authorities through the inspiration of God. Questions about authority are central to mystical teaching, as those who might be disciples most often desire guidance from someone with experience and greater knowledge than they possess.

AUTHORIZING THE TEACHER

This question of authority is always central to teaching: transmission of knowledge or experience from one to another depends on the assumption of a degree of knowledge on the part of the teacher and some degree of ignorance on the part of the student. Given its claim for immediate access to God, much mystical teaching often takes place outside of institutional forms and so does not lend itself to the kinds of hierarchical titles and certifications given in institutions of learning. So who possesses authority to teach, and who authorizes a teacher? Without a doubt, Jesus is considered the master teacher; indeed, the earliest Christian teachers were Jesus and Paul, who shaped earliest Christianity through the ways they taught others. Historical critical arguments aside, Jesus is commonly understood to have taught through words and actions, some of which were purposefully puzzling, in a likely effort to intrigue his followers. He used stories, short parables, and direct address to draw crowds in to hear his message. He also taught his disciples as a group: they travelled with him and likely assisted him in teaching along the way. In many ways, Jesus departed from the Judaic tradition of prophetic communities that showed complete deference to the rabbi or teacher, as he encouraged his disciples to question. His approach also differed in that he understood that the key was not how he taught but his example as teacher: rather than teaching about 'the way', he called himself 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14: 6 NRSV). For later Christians, his suffering authorized his teaching. Following Origen and Clement, Evagrius (345/6–99) writes in his *Kephalaia Gnostika*, 'Just as those who transmit [i.e., teach] children the letters write them on tablets, in the same way Christ too, while he teaches his wisdom to rational creatures, has traced it in the nature of the mortal body' (Evagrius, *Kaphalaia Gnostica* 3.57; Ramelli 2015: 173). The message of Jesus contrasted with the reigning ideology, and it was through this that Jesus sought to present new ideas, to encourage his followers to think and look within, and to live according to his example. Importantly, he charged his disciples to go abroad and teach (Matt. 28: 19–20), leading ultimately to widespread evangelization and catechization exemplified in the work of Paul, whose teaching was authorized by the followers of Jesus.

Other early teachers in Christianity were the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who, as elders possessing both experience and humility, taught their disciples through advice, direction, parable, and modelling behavior. Disciples who sought the wisdom of the elders often asked questions about habits or sins that stood between them and contact with God, and the answers they received were most often drawn from both personal experience and scriptural witness. The desert ascetics were the earliest spiritual directors and guides available to a wide variety of Christian seekers, and their authority is based on their experience and hard work of renunciation and suffering, although they often dismissed such claims to authority. They understand themselves as humble vessels for God's wisdom, but they also express fear about their abilities alongside a sense of having been chosen by God to serve a particular function. Later mystics continue this tradition of humility despite evidence to the contrary. Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, describes his own feelings of inadequacy in the role of teacher. In a letter to Oger, a canon regular, Bernard notes the proper profession of a monk was to mourn for sin, not to teach. He considers himself an unlearned person, who is wary of teaching what he does not know. And yet he taught in word and deed throughout his life. Similarly, the *Cloud* author is self-deprecatory, although he clearly writes from a personal familiarity with the path he describes and a facility with other sources in the tradition. He writes that he is 'anxious to be your spiritual father' and notes that he is inspired by love, not because he believes himself to possess any extraordinary knowledge or attainment of spiritual advancement. Mystics who teach often see themselves as of limited utility; as the *Cloud* author notes of the techniques he has taught, 'If you have the grace to put these to the test by experience, I believe that you will be able to teach me better than I can teach you' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 33; Walsh 1981: 182). He claims again and again not to possess tremendous skill and, like many mystics, understands that God is the ultimate teacher and that he is but a lowly human teacher. The authority to teach is often granted from without and only partially embraced by the mystic who teaches.

Questions of authority pervade teaching because teaching is, in part, about power. Nowhere is this more clear than when one considers gender in teaching contexts. Women were traditionally refused the role of public teacher in Christian traditions. Pauline sources condemn public teaching by women based on 1 Timothy 2: 11–12 (NRSV): 'Let a woman learn with silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.' That proscription is continued in patristic sources as well as by Thomas Aquinas, who, following Aristotle, argued that women were inherently inferior in intellect and reason, because they were created second and do not (and cannot) possess the full image of God. Indeed, teaching and even learning by women in public in particular was not permitted according to several influential Pauline sources: 'women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home' (1 Cor. 14: 34–5 NRSV). These passages were regularly reinterpreted throughout the tradition, most often to the detriment of women who aspired to teach. Indeed, it is difficult to find a study of medieval women that does not include the words of Jean Gerson on women as teachers.

The female sex is forbidden on apostolic authority to teach in public, that is either by word or by writing . . . All women's teaching, particularly formal teaching by word and by writing, is to be held suspect unless it has been diligently examined, and much more fully than men's. The reason is clear: common law—and not any kind of common law, but that which comes from on high—forbids them. And why? Because they are easily seduced and determined seducers; and because it is not proved that they are witnesses to divine grace.

(John Gerson, cited in Colledge and Walsh 1978: i. 51)

This statement would seem to close many doors to women who would like to teach others.

Yet there were exceptions to this blanket decree, including the *ammās* in the desert and female leaders of religious communities. After the twelfth century, certain women, if shown to possess particular wisdom or knowledge, were permitted to teach in private, either to other nuns in religious communities or to others as solitary anchoresses, and occasionally in the public sphere. As Walter Simon writes about beguines in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, 'some beguines were esteemed as teachers for more than their formal instruction in letters or proper behavior . . . girls and women sought their guidance on a wide range of moral and ethical issues' (Simon 2003: 83). As Simon describes, anchoresses often took on apprentices, a tradition continued by beguines in their communities. Indeed, the four female doctors (teachers) of the church, all of whom were named after 1970, are all prominent mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux. The apostolic letter declaring Hildegard's status as doctor refers specifically to her 'holiness of life and the originality of her teaching' and praises the 'wonderful harmony between teaching and daily life', both of which conformed to apostolic and ecclesiastical model (https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html). In the document declaring her new status, Catherine of Siena is called 'an outstanding teacher of the truth' (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (AAS), found at http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19701004_mirabilis-in-ecclesia.html). Julian of Norwich is a fine example of a woman who defied social norms by expressing herself publicly, and her work shows many of the tropes of humility and authority found throughout the tradition. Like many fellow mystics, she prefaced her teachings with the expected denigration of her worthiness:

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. But I know very well that what I am saying that I have received by the revelation of him who is the sovereign teacher. But it is truly love which moves me to tell it to you . . .

(Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 1.9; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 135)

Yet as Julian downplays and even denies her worthiness in her role as a teacher, she produces a work clearly designed to explicate and instruct. She sees herself as a vessel

for Christ's message, and she insists that her teachings are consistent with those of the Church, thereby buttressing her authority with that of the magisterium. 'God showed the very delight that he has in all men and women who accept, firmly and wisely, the preaching and teaching of Holy Church, for he is that Holy Church' (Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 34.15; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 235–6). This intimate connection between the mystic's claims and those of the Church enables mystics who are teachers to present their teachings as true and safe. These examples show that, despite ecclesiastical condemnation and associated social strictures, women have earned the authority to teach others in various ways.³

Teachers and students are always mutually dependent, but the power dynamics in mystical teaching are especially important to note and the ways teaching is authorized are essential to the teaching dynamic. If the goal of the student is to gain a greater sense of the presence of God, then the teacher is likely one who can make claims to having done so him or herself. Proof of the mastery of traditional sources of authority, like knowledge of scripture or adeptness at canon law, pale in comparison to proof that the mystic has, indeed, experienced the ultimate. That is likely in part why so many women became mystical teachers particularly during and after the thirteenth century, despite their lowly social status: they did not need access to formal teaching to attain mystical transformation themselves. Most mystics who teach are careful to couch their lessons on accepted authorities and on that foundation teach others. Despite their misgivings about claiming too much, many mystics gained the confidence and motivation to teach. The next step was to figure out how best to lead students to transformation.

TEACHING CONTEXTS AND METHODS

Pedagogical styles are always related to context and content. We can assume that the original mode of transmitting mystical knowledge was through oral tradition to individuals or groups; indeed, the strong claims to access to God in mystical thought often required that teachings left no trace that might end up in the wrong hands. Some oral traditions were preserved in written form, such as in the exhortation, information, instruction, anecdotes, and teaching by example so well exemplified in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, and many of the texts we read today might well have first been expressed aloud rather than first written. For those mystics who taught students either individually or in groups, mystical texts provide only a glimpse of the possible charisma and care (and perhaps ineptness) of the teacher and the wonder and devotion (and perhaps boredom) of the students. Plenty of formal and informal learning of skills and ideas happened outside the boundaries of the written textual record, or via other media, such

³ On this, see especially McGinn (2000).

as the paintings and stained glass that adorned churches. That said, there is plenty in the extant texts that can be related to pedagogical challenges and approaches, which tend to be particular to contexts and individuals. As Robert Faesen notes in Chapter 12, mystical texts communicate in various ways, using referential, emotive, and conative methods. Teachers choose specific texts and ways of delivery that help them teach their students, often despite their claims to humility and sometimes at great personal risk. The most common genres for mystical teaching include autobiography or diaries, biblical commentary, sermons, theological treatises, visionary experiences, spiritual itineraries, poetry, and song. Mystical teaching tended to be informal, the meeting of a learned or experienced individual with one or more followers. Many mystical texts are carefully constructed and published, while others are more like compilations of disparate lessons. Some texts read more like personal advice from a master to an individual, such as the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Theologia Germanica*. Still others create a literary scheme that plots a mystical journey. Key examples of this genre include Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentium ad Deum* and Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*. Others rely heavily on recounting personal experiences of change and transformation. Chief among the works that come from this tradition of personal experience is Augustine's *Confessions*, although many others have used their personal experience as the basis for teaching about the mystical path, including Margery Kempe, Ignatius Loyola, Marie of the Incarnation, and Jeanne Guyon, among others. Guyon and Loyola mix personal experience with a spiritual itinerary for the student to follow, while Kempe, for instance, focuses on her own experience and lets it speak to the students.

Mystical teaching can take place one-on-one or in more formal liturgical or institutional settings. To paint history in broad strokes, emergent Christian mystical communities initially formed as informal circles around a charismatic teacher. The earliest hermits, ascetics, and monastics of both genders in Egypt showed this tendency to group around a particular figure, such as Antony, whose battles with demons won him miraculous powers and the ability to talk directly to God. From the hermit who unwittingly gathered a following to intentional Pachomian monasteries, all included a hierarchy of influence, with the *abba* or *amma* as spiritual leader. Teaching in community most often embraced both ascetic and performative dimensions, including the cultivation of silence and obedience. This is true in the desert literature as well as in literature produced in monastic communities. These earliest communities often became more formalized over time, and the predominant form of mystical community came to reside within institutionalized religious orders. These institutions, understood broadly to include tertiary and beguine communities, provided structure and patterns for teaching and discipleship, as they still do today. In these cases, spiritual seekers would find a spiritual master or set of masters who could lead them intellectually, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and ethically. Within each of these broader contexts, mystics who taught tended to choose a mix of three methods that are still staples of pedagogy today: lecture (imparting), discussion (supporting an individual's path), and scaffolded learning.

LECTURE AND DISCUSSION

For the purposes of this study, 'lecture' refers to texts that present information, while 'discussion' includes those that present information through direct address and dialogue. Many mystics write directly to their students, admonishing, cajoling, encouraging, and directing through direct address, with 'you' as the key subject, while others present their information from a more objective vantage point. Sometimes this type of address is used to emphasize the difficulty of the work required to read the book. For instance, Marguerite Porete opens her *Mirror of Simple Souls* with a warning to her readers, telling them 'it is very difficult to comprehend' and 'You will not have the intellect for it, / No matter how brilliant your abilities, / If you do not proceed humbly' (Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, Explicit; Babinsky 1993: 79). The book closes with approbation from several churchmen who vouch for the orthodoxy of the book's contents, although with notes about the esoteric and difficult nature of the text. In this case, Porete is setting herself (or her book) up as an authority from which one will learn as one might from a difficult lecture. A less harsh but straightforward approach is that taken in the *Book of Privy Counseling*, written by the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. This guide traces a spiritual path of increasing apophaticism that moves in stages with the student. The book could be characterized as a collection of imperatives. For instance, the author admonishes the reader to 'Think that he is as he is, and think that you are as you are' (Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, *A Letter of Private Direction* 1; Griffiths 1981: 21). The author is liberal with requests that the reader 'make sure' that he or she is following the directions, which ultimately aim at encouraging the seeker to reach out to God in faith. This is presented as a simple task: 'Make sure that your contemplation is not divided and that your love is pure. Make sure that you are like that, so that you yourself, and nothing else at all, are worked on by grace and quietly nourished in your will to love God alone—God just as God is' (Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, *A Letter of Private Direction* 1; Griffiths 1981: 22). This manner of direct address is common in mystical texts, as it draws the reader in and works for both lecture and discussion modes.

Most mystics mix lecture and discussion; indeed, it is likely that for every text that straightforwardly explains a mystical itinerary there were many oral discussions of the meaning of the text. Teaching and learning, in one time-honoured form, show teacher and student engaged together in pursuit of wisdom and truth in a dialectical relationship. This kind of give and take is described well by Aelred of Rievaulx in *On Friendship*. In the dialogue with Aelred Ivo responds, 'I'm ready to learn, not to teach; to accept not to give; to draw in, not to pour out. This is how my youth orders, my inexperience compels, and my monastic profession commands' (Aelred of Rievaulx, *On Friendship*, book 1; McGinn 2006: 136). Aelred agrees, but only if Ivo understands that that the pedagogical conversation is meant to be reciprocal. Aelred notes that in a conversation one should 'learn and teach something, both give and receive, both pour out and draw in' (Aelred of Rievaulx, *On Friendship*, book 1; McGinn 2006: 136). This mutual teaching and learning

sound ideal, yet that ideal is very difficult to attain. Some mystics write in dialogue form to allow for this dynamic while controlling the outcome. One genre that tells us much about teaching methods is mystical lessons set in a dialogue in a sort of fictionalized *disputatio*. Here, the teacher is presented with questions within a group or one-on-one setting and lessons are found within the answers. This imagined dialogue between master and disciple aims to lead the reader or hearer to better understanding of a mystical path and goal. Examples of these abound well beyond Augustine's *De Magistro* and Cassian's *Conferences*. Jakob Boeheme's *Dialogue*, for instance, is an interchange between a master and disciple on heaven, hell, and the capacities of the human soul. Henry Suso's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* features a conversation between the Servant as the student and Eternal Wisdom as the teacher.

A more familiar mode of teaching might well be *lectio*, in which the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge for which the student is a passive recipient. The traditional lecture, which is essentially a one-way transmission of knowledge, is also, in many cases, focused on mastering, on disciplining, and on indoctrinating. There is little of the one-on-one coaching through advice that one finds in discussion, arguably the more active and more effective method of teaching for some, particular when bodily dispositions are at stake. Yet much mystical teaching is ultimately a blend of *lectio* and *disputatio*, as we see the mystic leading the student by asking direct questions and prompting thoughtful reflection in addition to more straightforward information. The most compelling of these texts are those that address the reader or hearer directly, making the work seem a shared endeavour in which the master and disciple consider the issues together. This drawing in of the student likely enabled mystics who taught to put the learning, in part, in the hands of the student, however complicated and sometimes convoluted the presentation. Both styles of teaching lend themselves to a staged presentation, which is here called scaffolded learning, a modern pedagogical term for an ancient pedagogical concept.

SCAFFOLDED LEARNING

This sort of learning lends itself best to mystical teaching that is expressly geared to a developmental scheme, consisting of a series of steps or stages of growth or movement toward (or back to) God. Many authors choose a hierarchical or climbing upward motif, as seen in Bonaventure's ascension from the material to the spiritual world. Other examples include Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* with its paradigmatic ascent to the Godhead, Ruusbroec's spiritual ladder, and Walter Hilton's *Ladder of Perfection*. Similar step-by-step approaches can be found in Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, in which each room signifies a stage of perfection. Another example is Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, which is in part a guidebook to a seven-stage ascent to spiritual perfection. Such itineraries or maps lend themselves to explication over a series of chapters and follow the development of the student, moving on only when the student

is fully prepared for the next step. The student starts with the easiest steps and moves through increasingly challenging steps to reach the pinnacle (or the abyss) that makes transformation possible.

One staple of education since Greek antiquity is that students should begin with simplicity and work toward complexity. This method is certainly important in mystical texts, many of which are deliberately written in scaffolded form, with some, like the *Cloud of Unknowing*, admonishing readers to read the work in order or not at all. Hildegard of Bingen says God told her to 'explain these things in such a way that the hearer, receiving the word of his instructor, may expound them in those words' (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, Declaration; Hart and Bishop 1990: 59). This attention to the level of the student is crucial in many mystical texts, some of which open themselves up to broad audiences but most of which direct themselves only to those at a particular spiritual level. Bernard of Clairvaux recognizes that his audience is a mix of those more and those less advanced: 'Yet I owe something to the unwise, too (Rom. 1: 14), and it is usual to add something for their benefit for what is sufficient for the wise man' (Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* 1.1; Evans 1987: 174). The student's current situation and potential for learning tend to guide mystics who teach in pitching their lessons in appropriate ways.

Most mystical texts begin with simplicity, and some even liken their work to that done by teachers of children. John Cassian notes that learning prayer is done through observation, and it is clear that he believes that learning takes place through stages.

You were quite right to make the comparison between training in continuous prayer and the teaching of children who at first do not know the alphabet, do not recognize letters, and are unable to write . . . Models are put before them, carefully drawn in wax. By continually studying them, by practicing every day to reproduce them, they learn at last to write. The same happens with contemplation. You need a model and you keep it constantly before your eyes.

(Cassian *Conferences* 10.10; Luiheid 1985: 132)

Similarly, Julian of Norwich twice likens theological learning to learning the ABCs. She writes, 'For [God and the Holy Spirit] work continually in us, all together, and those are great things; and of this greatness he wants us to have knowledge here, as it were an ABC. That is to say that we can have a little knowledge of that which we shall have the fullness in heaven, and that is to further us' (Julian of Norwich, *Showings* 80; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 335). Simplicity is sometimes the goal of a mystic's path, however. The *Cloud* author, in his quest to get his followers to enter the 'cloud of forgetting', gives the following advice:

If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word. So as to have a better grasp of it, take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two; for the shorter it is the better it is in agreement with this exercise of the spirit. Such a one is the word 'God' or the word 'love' . . . choose . . . the word of one syllable that you like best. (*Cloud of Unknowing* 7; Walsh 1981: 133-4)

Gaining this level of simplicity is difficult, and the *Cloud* author believes strongly that progress in the mystical path cannot be experienced without sufficient preparation: 'there can be no profitable reflection without previous reading, or hearing . . . Nor will beginners or proficients come to true prayer without previous reflection' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 35; Walsh 1981: 188). Almost always, mystics who teach lead their students by increasing degrees of complexity and challenge.

This training for complexity aids in the ultimate goal of mystical teaching, which is emancipation from the teacher, the natural end of a student who experiences gradual, sustained growth. Some mystics are very clear that their teaching is temporary and that, ideally, students will learn to seek God on their own. The goal of the teaching of the *Cloud* is to recognize that the Holy Spirit leads the body and soul toward God, a movement that is originated by God Himself. In order to enable this to happen, the body and soul must be prepared through reading, praying, and reflecting. Experience along the path will be its own teacher. The seeking student will learn through experience how to respond and behave. A curriculum that is very carefully sketched out and carefully directive still has as its goal the student's freedom. If the mystic who teaches is but an instrument of God's will in his teaching, then he or she is not interested in teaching a particular set of knowledge (indeed, they rarely claim to possess such a thing) but rather in teaching ways to union with God. The teacher is, ideally, freed from the responsibility of teaching if the teaching has been done well, and teaching towards transformation is most often done through a series of stages. There are many reasons for this. For instance, it seems obvious that complex ideas can only be understood on a foundation of simpler concepts. It also seems likely that mystics who attained transformation did so through experiencing stages—and sometimes leaps—of growth. Finally, one who seeks has to begin somewhere, just as the child who wishes to read must learn the alphabet.

These methods of teaching—through texts, through lecture and discussion, and through scaffolded learning—all take place in particular contexts conducive to learning. The goal of the teachers and learners in each case is to begin, to foster, or to complete the process of transformation that is at the heart of the mystical quest. Learners might be able to accomplish this change without external help, but teachers act as useful guides and inspiration for what is often a very long path to God. Teachers, too, need students, and all teachers learn much from the questions and challenges their students pose. The process transforms both parties in small increments or large leaps, depending on so many factors. In some ways, however, the beauty is in the process of explaining, of modeling, and of leading others to another way of experiencing the world.

CONCLUSION

There are no teachers without students, but how that relationship is understood depends strongly on context and the subject(s) at hand. Teachers, who are assumed to be masters of a subject, and learners, who are apprentices or disciples, work in a reciprocal

relationship, based in part of the natural capacity of the learner and the skills and motivations of the teacher. There has been a tendency in studies of mysticism and religious experience more broadly to consider the mystical quest as a highly individual and idiosyncratic venture, but it is clear that many mystics wrote to instruct groups of followers. Teaching implies recipients of that teaching, both as individuals and in aggregate, and it implies superior knowledge, which is based in small part on the mystic's own experience but relies almost entirely on inspiration from God. Mystics are authorized by others to teach by the evidence of their own mystical transformation, but they see themselves primarily as vessels of God's teachings, humbly instrumental in their life's work. The teaching vocation of many mystics is undeniable; despite their claims of humility, many mystics felt compelled from within or without to write what they knew as a way of teaching others, because what they knew was transformative and divine. What we know of historical mystical teaching we know through the writings of mystics, but we know that writing cannot capture all of the nuances and complexities of teaching and learning. Mystics teach because they have attained a level of experience along with the ability and drive to share that experience with others, and yet they often remain in awe of what they teach. Teresa of Avila sums up what seems to be behind her effort to describe her experiences: 'I do not know if I have conveyed any impression of the nature of rapture: to give a full idea of it, as I have said, is impossible' (Teresa, *Inner Castle*, 6.4; Peers 1989: 156). Despite these difficulties, mystics who teach do their best with the words and methods they have. And as a whole, mystics who teach do so as instruments of God guiding other faulty humans to the ultimate goal of earthly life. That requires hard work and a high degree of idealism and faith that the goal can be attained. Mystics who teach do so because they see potential in their students and the truth of their own experience, by which they can help to transform others. The words of the *Cloud* author likely resonate with many teachers: 'Because it is not what you are nor what you have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be' (*Cloud of Unknowing* 75; Walsh 1981: 265).

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CHAPTER 9

THE ASCETIC LIFE

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ASCETICISM: INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION

IN classical antiquity the Greek term *askēsis* and its cognates originally referred to the training necessary to acquire a skill. It denotes disciplined exercise and deliberate repetitive practice undertaken for a specific purpose. In the earliest sources *askēsis* often refers to athletic training, but it can also describe any exercise necessary for the development of a profession, artistic skill, or special lifestyle. The later philosophical tradition applied it to the quest for moral excellence, *arête*, or virtue (Kittel 1964: i. 494–6). For Aristotle the goal of *askēsis* is the constant, delicate maintenance of a ‘midpoint’ or balance with regard to human impulses or drives. Aristotle describes virtue, moral excellence, as a habit acquired by constantly maintaining and fine-tuning the balance between two opposing ‘vices’ or negative tendencies: excess on the one hand; and deficiency on the other (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.15, 1107a; Irwin 1999: 25). Appropriate asceticism will thus vary, depending both on the goal towards which one is oriented and on the strength and direction of the impulses to which one is subject.

In the Christian mystical tradition, the term ‘asceticism’ encompasses a broad range of practices intended to eliminate vice and inculcate virtue. Christianity inherited from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy the conviction that ascetical practice, the *bios praktikos* or *vita activa* is a necessary preparation for contemplation, the *bios theoretikos* or *vita contemplativa*. In the Christian East growth in spiritual maturity came to be envisioned as a tripartite ascent from ascetical practice (*praktikē*) to natural contemplation (*physikē*) and contemplation of the divine nature (*theologikē*). The principal exponent of this model of ascent is the monk Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) who used it as the basis for his spiritual trilogy of *Praktikos*, *Gnostikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnostica*. His model is based on a classical pedagogical triad regularly reiterated in the writings of Philo (d. c.50) and borrowed from the older Sophists, according to which education is based on instruction,

nature, and practice (*askēsis*). In Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Origen (d. 254) this became a threefold method of interpreting the scriptures: literal, moral, and mystical (see Smalley 1964: 1–34). For Evagrius this model was both a method of biblical exegesis and a description of the soul's journey towards God (Evagrius, *Praktikos*, prol 8, chs 1–3, 84–9; Sinkewicz 2003: 97, 111–12). Evagrius' model won favour in the East through its adoption by Maximus Confessor (d. 662); it was adapted and popularized in the West through the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of Evagrius's disciple John Cassian (d. c.430).

An analogous model of spiritual growth arose somewhat later in the West that depicts asceticism as purgation from sin, leading to 'illumination', and eventually culminating in an experience of contemplative union with God. The doctrine of three 'ways' of purgation, illumination, and union is often associated with the sixteenth-century Carmelite tradition represented by Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and John of the Cross (d. 1591). However, these categories had long been known in the West through such texts as the *De Triplici Via* by the Franciscan Bonaventure (d. 1274) and the *Spiritual Exercises* of the Benedictine García de Cisneros (d. 1510). The goal of Christian asceticism thus came to be understood not simply as moral perfection, but rather theosis, 'divinization' as it was described in the East, and beatific vision and *unio mystica*, mystical union, in the West.

From this perspective asceticism appears in a wholly positive light. It is an essential component of spiritual growth analogous to the athlete's quest to achieve peak physical efficiency. Ascetical practices such as fasting, celibacy and nocturnal vigils are not ends in themselves but are rather tools that help keep in balance physical drives such as hunger, thirst, sleep, and the desire for intimacy. Voluntary dispossession, obedience, and ritual prayer similarly assist in harmonizing more interior intellectual impulses: namely, those concerned with ownership, leadership, personal worth in relationships, and the capacity to maintain inner attentiveness to God.

This positive understanding of *askēsis* as training in moral and spiritual balance has always been present in Christian teaching. In the West it was most definitively expressed in Thomas Aquinas's treatise on habits, virtues, and vices (*Summa Theologica* Ia-IIae, q. 49–89; Dominicans 1947: i. 793–992). However, this balanced understanding has often been overshadowed by a more negative approach. Since moral training is always strenuous and sometimes painful, there exists a perennial tendency to shift from the metaphor of athletic or artistic exercise to that of military warfare. In place of Aristotle's complex quest for a mean or midpoint between opposing vices of excess and deficiency, Christian moral teaching has often substituted a simplified schema that focuses on the need to suppress or 'mortify' powerful desires that lead to sin. This approach may divert the focus of asceticism from the contemplative goal of union with God towards a potentially unwholesome preoccupation with whatever is most difficult or unpleasant. Ignatius Loyola's (d. 1556) otherwise helpful doctrine of *agere contra* 'strive against [temptation]' (*Spiritual Exercises*, Annotation 13, Mullen 1914: 9) can be made to serve a kind of spiritual masochism that undertakes ascetical practices not because they are necessarily therapeutic, but precisely because they are difficult and painful.

Bishop Kallistos Ware has emphasized the importance of distinguishing between natural asceticism and negative asceticism. Natural asceticism has as its goal 'the

“refinement” of our physicality, so that we are more accessible to “the influence of higher forces” and thus approach closer to God. Negative asceticism, on the other hand, emphasizes ‘the fact of abstaining from this or that . . . depriving oneself of something by way of punishment’ (Ware 1998: 10–11). By emphasizing the destruction of our instinctive urges negative asceticism can lead to hatred of the body, whereas natural asceticism has as its goal ‘the reintegration of the body and the transformation of the passions into their true and natural condition . . . transfiguration rather than mortification’ (Ware 1998: 12–13).

ASCETICISM FOR THE COMING KINGDOM

The classical vocabulary of virtue and asceticism is rare in the New Testament, possibly by design. It is difficult to emphasize the value of human striving while at the same time preaching a doctrine of utter dependence on the unmerited grace of God. However, despite apparent reluctance on the part of the biblical authors to employ the traditional vocabulary of classical asceticism, the practices recommended in the New Testament are clearly derived both from Jewish religious practice and the Graeco-Roman ascetical-philosophical tradition. The authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke attribute to Jesus particular emphasis on the ascetical practices of unselfconscious fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and dispossession. However, these practices are not, as Richard Finn has noted, ‘linked to a personal struggle for holiness’ (Finn 2009: 100); rather they are presented as the lifestyle expected of disciples who live in eager expectation of the imminent coming of God’s kingdom. Early Christian ascetical practice was less a quest for virtue than a preparation for apocalypse (Matt. 6: 1–34; Luke 12: 22–40).

Prominent in the teaching of Jesus and even more so in that of St Paul is the warning that such a lifestyle will likely result in persecution and suffering, and will thus require the virtue of patient endurance, *hupomonē* (Matt. 5: 11, 10: 23; Luke 11: 49; Rom. 12: 14; 1 Thess. 3: 4). As time passed it became increasingly clear to the Christian community that deliberate avoidance of participation in local pagan cults was itself a form of potentially dangerous asceticism, engendering suspicion and animosity. Such abstinence deprived Christians of the joy of participating with their neighbours in communal celebrations and effectively branded them as outsiders and dissidents.

One result of this was the emergence of a Christian form of apocalyptic mysticism. Already evident in the later Jewish prophets (Ezekiel, Daniel) is an emphasis that becomes even more explicit in the intertestamental Book of Enoch and the Christian Book of Revelation on what in Jewish tradition would later be called *merkabah* (‘chariot’) mysticism: that is, ascent to the heavenly palace and vision of the throne of God. In later Judaism the definition of ‘prophet’ increasingly came to mean one who had seen in vision the heavenly court and the divine throne. Within Christianity the personal and social asceticism required of the baptized came to be understood as preparation for and even as a proleptic participation in the imminently coming Kingdom of Heaven. Thus

the asceticism of preparing for the Kingdom could yield, at least for some, the fruit of mystical vision, hinted at by St Paul (2 Cor. 12: 1–5) and exemplified in the Book of Revelation.

Although moderns tend to disparage everything associated with an apocalyptic outlook, it is possible that early Christian apocalyptic asceticism may still be of value. Much effort is expended today in denying the reality and inevitability of death. Acknowledgement of the nearness of God's Kingdom (for, indeed, the arrival of that kingdom through death may occur at any time) can help sharpen the individual's awareness of the preciousness and irreplaceable nature of present opportunities and relationships.

MARTYRDOM

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of martyrdom for the development of Christian asceticism. Later 'professional ascetics', monks and nuns, would be popularly regarded and would indeed see themselves as successors of the martyrs, as spiritual athletes whose ascetical practices throughout life substituted for the 'red martyrdom' of death that characterized the eras of Christian persecution. Origen who was both an exemplar and early Christian theorist of asceticism extolled martyrdom and regretted having escaped it in his youth (Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*; Greer 1979: 1–41).

On one level the martyrs' willingness to die rather than deny the Christian faith was a vivid, regularly renewed re-enactment of Christ's salvific suffering. Popular early accounts of the martyrs' trials and death were often deliberately modelled on the biblical passion narratives (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6.2; Roberts 1885a: 40). Furthermore, at a deeper level the martyr was not only a symbol but also an *alter Christus* whose prayers for both the living and the dead were thought to be especially efficacious and were thus particularly sought-after. Moreover, the martyr could be gifted with mystical vision. Just before his death the protomartyr Stephen received a vision of the person of Jesus and the glory of God: 'Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand' (Acts 7: 55–6). The martyr Polycarp (d. c.153) was granted a vision that confirmed his imminent death (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5.2; Roberts 1885a: 40).

The martyr was popularly regarded as a powerful intercessor whose self-sacrifice not only guaranteed the martyr a heavenly reward, but which also had the power to atone for the sins of others. Thus the prayers of the martyr Perpetua (d. c.203) were rewarded with a vision of her deceased brother released from torment in the afterlife; and both she and her companion Saturus were granted visions of their triumph over suffering and of the delights of heaven (*Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* 1–4; Wallace 1885: 700–3). Yet martyrdom has also been an ambiguous ascetical ideal. While one could legitimately aspire to it, and indeed all early Christians were supposed to be prepared for it as a possibility, deliberately provoking authorities or aggressively seeking out martyrdom was

regarded with suspicion and often condemned in popular Christian texts (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4; Roberts 1885a: 40).

From the perspective of mystical theology, the goals of martyrdom include the following. First, the martyrs' willingness to suffer and die for a religious belief was itself a powerful, non-verbal form of evangelization, a 'witness' (*martyria*) to membership in a transcendent, eschatological community that claimed a higher loyalty than obedience to Roman cultural norms. The example of virgin-martyrs who claimed a mystical relationship with a heavenly bridegroom challenged traditional Roman definitions of 'self' in terms of familial and political status and obligation (Brown 1988: 67–9, 71–3). Second, the martyr's suffering and death made Christ's expiatory sacrifice personal and immediate: to behold the martyr was, in a sense, to contemplate Christ. Third and finally, the martyrs' death was universally regarded among Christians as a guarantee of salvation and sanctity, bestowing the power of intercession and sometimes of prophecy. In an age characterized by increasing anxiety concerning post-baptismal sin, the martyr's heroism and power of intercession was a consoling assurance of the nearness of salvation.

MONASTIC ASCETICISM

Celibacy and Simplification of Life

Two ascetical practices, lifelong celibacy and simplification of life became especially prominent with the rise of Christian monasticism. In Christianity as well as in other world religions the concept of asceticism is so closely associated with the institution of monasticism that the term 'ascetic' is often a synonym for 'monk'. It is thus appropriate to briefly recount the origins and variety of early monastic ascetical practice. The origins of Christian monasticism are obscure. In the early first century BCE Philo of Alexandria (d. c.50) described celibate communities of Jewish men in Palestine, and of both Jewish men and women in Egypt dedicated to moral improvement and meditation on sacred scripture. Communities of Christian women, 'widows and virgins' existed in some form by the late first century CE, and are mentioned in both the Pastoral Epistles and in early patristic texts. Extant texts attest only to their existence, however; the story of their evolution and relationship with the developing Christian Church as well as possible influence by pre-Christian precursors is conjectural. What is certain is that communities of nuns (*parthenoi*/virgins) were well-established by the late third and early fourth centuries when their more famous male counterparts, the *abbas* Antony, Paul, Amoun, and Pachomius, began to practise asceticism in the deserts of Egypt. At roughly the same time Syrian 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant' enthusiastically embraced lifelong celibacy and committed themselves to service in the local church, living either in small groups or with their families.

Common to the programmes of all these ascetical pioneers was some form of simplicity of life, often taking the form of common ownership of goods or the reduction to an

absolute minimum of the availability and use of such goods. Sexual activity ranked highly among these goods. Abstinence from sexual intercourse had frequently been associated with ritual purity in late antiquity, both in Judaism and in some pagan cults (Brown 1988: 67). Christianity assimilated this association with varying emphases during different eras. In some early communities, most notably among the third- and fourth-century Syrian 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant' celibacy was considered a necessary level of spiritual maturity; and among the so-called *enkratites* or 'chaste ones' celibacy was considered a prerequisite for baptism. Although this extreme was eventually condemned as heretical, the notion of celibacy as a 'higher' calling (i.e. superior to marriage) persists in both Orthodox and Roman Catholic doctrine today. As Peter Brown has described, the practice of celibacy, together with the more widely practised asceticisms of fasting and frequent prayer were believed by the early monks and nuns to have the power to transform, to 'spiritualize' the human body. Reducing food, water, and sleep to the absolute minimum necessary for life was thought to facilitate restoration of the original state of the human body before the Fall: 'the ascetic slowly remade his body... [effecting] the long return of the human person, body and soul together, to an original, natural and uncorrupted state' (Brown 1988: 223). Stories of the early *abbas* and *ammas* occasionally allude to this mystical transformation:

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said: 'Abba, as far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a little fasting, and prayer, and meditation, and quiet: and as far as I can I try to cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. What else should I do?' Then the old man rose, and spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles: and he said: 'If you will, you could become a living flame.'

(*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Latin Systematic Collection* 12.8;
Chadwick 1958: 142)

The moral and spiritual transformation wrought by monastic asceticism might thus be manifested in the ascetic's physical appearance. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) wrote that 'God became human so that human beings might be divinized' (*On the Incarnation* 54.3; Thomson 1971: 268–9); and in his biography of the monk Antony, Athanasius described both the ascetical regime that effects transformation and the changes that may become visible. In his very popular and widely disseminated *Life of Antony* Athanasius created what undoubtedly became the most influential verbal portrait of the early Christian ascetic. According to Athanasius, Antony's first teachers and models of virtue were members of his local Christian community. However, after several years of supervised ascetical effort Antony felt called to protracted solitude in an abandoned fort (*Life of Antony* 3, 11–13; Gregg 1980: 32, 39–42). He spent twenty years alone, eventually coming forth,

as if from a shrine, like one initiated in sacred mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God... his body had its habitual appearance, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor withered from fasting and fighting with demons... The state of his soul was pure, neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, possessed by neither laughter nor dejection. For he was neither troubled when he saw the crowd nor

ecstatic at being acclaimed by so many. Instead he was wholly balanced, as if governed by reason, and established in accordance with nature.

(Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 14; Gregg 1980: 42, tr. modified)

Athanasius here provides a vivid depiction of the goal of Christian asceticism: a soul restored to its primordial natural state (*kata fusin*), completely balanced (*holos isos*), in a body rendered vigorous and fit through the avoidance of excess. Thus monastic asceticism came to be understood not primarily as a wholehearted rejection of the present world, as in the earlier apocalyptic asceticism; but rather as a means of positively transforming or ‘transfiguring’ the body and abilities of the ascetic. Like the martyr, the ascetic was a living reminder of the world to come, but the transformed ascetic was also a counsellor and teacher, capable of ministering to the spiritual needs of others.

Community and Solitude

Christian monks and nuns throughout history have experimented with widely varying forms of community and solitude, testing the respective advantages and disadvantages, the different ascetical opportunities and impediments afforded by each. Even before the birth of Christ, in the writings of Philo, the hermit had come to exemplify the contemplative life, while those who practise asceticism in community were models of the quest for moral virtue. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, John Cassian provided a Christian rationale for this conviction in his *Institutes* and *Conferences*, fortifying his rationale with examples and teachings he attributed to the early founders of monasticism.

Life in community offers abundant opportunities for the practice of obedience, mutual service, and fraternal correction, forms of asceticism enjoined throughout the New Testament. The community can serve as a mirror, reflecting back those elements of behaviour and personality in need of change. The importance of objective ‘others’ willing to speak honestly and openly of defects they perceive had already been acknowledged and emphasized by the pagan philosopher-physician Galen (d. c.200) (*The Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul’s Passions* 3–4/5.13–5.24; Harkins 1963: 33–44). The monastic legislator Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) echoed Galen and highlighted the value of community in his *Long Rules*, stressing both the value of community in discerning one’s faults and the opportunities for service afforded by community: ‘Whose feet, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be the lowest, if you live alone’ (*Long Rules* 3.6; Wagner 2010: 252)?

Solitude, exemplified by the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist, came to be regarded as a higher, more spiritual, and potentially more dangerous calling, offering both the benefit of leisure for contemplation and the terrifying prospect of direct temptation by demonic powers. On a more positive note the spiritually advanced who undertook this perilous path would become more vividly aware of the soul’s weaknesses and perceive with greater clarity the contours of the battlefield of the innermost self. In monastic

literature the primordial literary portrait of the hermit-monk was Athanasius's biography of the monk Antony. As has been described, Athanasius portrays Antony's early ascetical training as formed by the liturgical life of his village and by the wise example and teaching of semi-hermit elders living nearby (*Life of Antony* 3; Gregg 1980: 32). In Athanasius's depiction the transformation of Antony has a further goal: the transfigured Antony becomes an *abba*, a wise elder competent to listen with understanding to the stories and struggles of others. Throughout the rest of Athanasius's portrayal Antony is a 'physician to Egypt' (*Life of Antony* 87; Gregg 1980: 94), able to help others interpret and make sense of their thoughts. Such a spiritual adviser was considered an essential prerequisite to the art of discernment.

Discernment (*diakrisis*) was understood as a skill that requires both dialogue and submission to spiritual authority. It begins with the necessary humiliation of opening one's heart to another in whose judgement one trusts. This revelation of the inner landscape of the soul, including especially the thoughts and temptations with which one is afflicted, permits the spiritual guide, the *abba* or *amma*, to diagnose spiritual afflictions and recommend ascetical remedies. As will be described in the next section, this skill can be understood as an application of the art of biblical exegesis to the soul, that is, to the salvation history of the disciple, rather than to the sacred text.

The interrelationship between communal and solitary asceticism is perennial in Christianity. It is exemplified in the East by the monastic colony of Mount Athos, founded in the tenth century on a peninsula in northern Greece. Athos, 'The Holy Mountain' endures to this day and encompasses a wide spectrum of ascetical observance, ranging from hermits' cells to large, long-established cenobia, and including as well small 'lavras' that combine elements of both the eremitic and cenobitic life. In the West monastic reform movements from at least the tenth century to the present have tried to create an approved context for solitaries. Medieval anchoresses were often ritually established in cells adjoining parish churches, while new orders of men such as the Camaldolese (1072) Carthusians (1084), and Grandmontines (c.1100) strove to incorporate elements of the solitary life into a canonically approved cenobitic structure.

EXEGESIS OF THE SCRIPTURES AND OF THE SOUL

Nepsis

In the Christian ascetical tradition there is an interrelationship between biblical exegesis and the exercise of *nepsis*, 'watchfulness over thoughts'. The practice of reciting and meditating sacred scripture as a means purifying the soul and shielding it from temptation is common to many religious traditions. Attentive observation of emotional reactions and subjective psychological states had long been a part of the Middle Platonic and

Stoic philosophical traditions, whose texts were familiar to successive generations of Christian authors beginning with the philosopher Justin Martyr (d. 165). Ethical treatises and collections of sayings attributed to ancient philosophers served as handbooks for moral progress. Christian authors, however, preferred to find models of virtuous life and solutions to moral dilemmas in the texts of sacred scripture. At the most basic practical level biblical texts were recommended as therapeutic aids to be deployed in circumstances of moral struggle, often experienced as temptations to sin. Athanasius of Alexandria recommended particular psalms to be recited during specific affective and ethical trials (*Letter to Marcellinus* 15–26; Gregg 1980: 114–23; see Kolbet 2006). The monk Evagrius Ponticus wrote detailed spiritual and psychological analyses of this practice in *Praktikos* and *On Thoughts*; and in the treatise *Antirrhētikos* he collected 498 therapeutic Bible verses to be used in the struggle against the eight principal *logosmoi*, or tempting-thoughts of gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, despondency, acedia, vainglory, and pride.

Biblical Exegesis

The inner purity effected by biblical meditation and other ascetical practices was considered a prerequisite to contemplation of the deeper, mystical meanings of the sacred text. Biblical meditation and exegesis were considered both a necessary ascetical practice and a potential opportunity for contemplation, since the Bible came to be regarded as both an inspired record of encounters with God and a privileged locus of mystical experience for those who meditated on the text. Christianity had inherited from Middle Platonism, especially Philo of Alexandria, a conviction that biblical texts contain deeper meanings, *logoi*, concealed beneath the literal or historical sense of the text. The principal early Christian exponents of this approach were Clement of Alexandria and Origen who believed that beneath the historical ‘letter’ of the text there can be discerned at least three spiritual levels. First is a moral or ‘tropological’ sense that invites inner ethical renewal and external acts of compassion. At a deeper level the mystical or allegorical sense presents Christian doctrine in veiled, symbolic metaphors (see Smalley 1964: 6–13). John Cassian added a fourth heavenly or eschatological level that he called ‘anagogical’, at which the biblical text mysteriously transcends time and affords a glimpse of the eternal world to come (*Conference* 14, 6.1–11.1; Ramsey 1997: 505–17).

Diakrisis

In the ascetical practice of *diakrisis*, ‘discernment’, the skills acquired through biblical meditation and exegesis are focused inward on the soul. As Peter Brown has written, ‘The monk’s own heart was the new book. What required infinitely skilled exegesis and long spiritual experience were the “movements of the heart,” and the strategies and snares that the Devil laid within it’ (Brown 1988: 229). Athanasius, Evagrius, and John

Cassian all wrote extensively on this subject. At its most fundamental level *diakrisis*/discernment is the ascetical project of determining the origin and significance of thoughts and dreams, distinguishing between harmful and helpful subjective experiences. This exercise of differentiating thoughts is not simply an initial rung on a ladder of spiritual progress, but rather a skill that must be practised daily throughout life, since temptation endures until the moment of death (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36; Sinkewicz 2003: 104). In a process analogous to the exercise of biblical exegesis the ascetic develops *prosochē*, attentiveness to the inner world of thoughts, desires, and fantasies, and then learns through *paratērēsis*, thoughtful observation, to distinguish the origins of these experiences. Evagrius Ponticus repeated and developed the insights of Antony and Athanasius, employing a threefold approach that distinguishes between: (1) angelic *noēmata* that educate and console the mind, leading it to God; (2) neutral thoughts that arise from memory and sense-perception; and (3) demonic *logismoi*, tempting thoughts and fantasies that pervert the natural powers of the mind and lead it into error. Angelic *noēmata* are characterized by feelings of peace and 'are concerned with the inner nature of things and with searching out their spiritual principles'. Human thoughts are characterized by simple images, unclouded by passion. Demonic *logismoi*, in contrast, are disturbing or terrifying and incline the soul towards passion and vice (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 80, *On Thoughts* 8; Sinkewicz 2003: 110, 158).

Spiritual Exercise

Closely related to the disciplines of discernment and biblical meditation is the practice of 'spiritual exercise'. Its antecedents lie in the classical genres of ethical treatises and moral-philosophical wisdom sayings or *gnomai*, such as the Stoic *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the Neo-Pythagorean *chreia* of Clitarchus, and the *Pythagorean Sentences*. These collections served as handbooks for the acquisition of virtue and were sometimes arranged in intriguing thematic clusters intended to stimulate intellectual reflection and guide moral improvement (Cribiore 2005: 167, 201–4; Cribiore 1996: 316). Such texts were evidently of interest to early Christians who rearranged and expanded them, adding Christian proverbs and succinct exegetical reflections to the pagan *gnomai*, creating treatises intended to lead the reader to specifically Christian insights or affective experiences. The second-century *Sentences of Sextus* and the third-century *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria are among the earliest Christian collections of this type, although similar chains of ethical and exegetical *gnomai* may be found in earlier catechetical texts such as the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas*. Evagrius Ponticus produced numerous collections of pedagogically arranged chains of proverbs and exegetical sentences intended to sequentially lead the reader from ethical improvement to contemplation of God in creation and history, and finally to contemplation of the divine nature. Maximus Confessor developed the genre further in his *Centuries*, compilations of one hundred carefully structured, brief meditations that guide the reader and reinterpret earlier Christian collections.

These early forms of spiritual exercise had as their goal both moral improvement and contemplative experience. In the Christian East the rituals and texts of the eucharistic celebration came to be regarded as a constantly repeated spiritual exercise that was explained in guides and commentaries that remain popular today, as will be described. In the medieval West spiritual exercises increasingly focused on the life of Christ, particularly his passion and death; and guided meditations by Bernard (d. 1153), Aelred (d. 1167), and Bonaventure popularized this approach. A more personal element was introduced by Gertrude of Helfta (d. c.1302) who wrote the first treatise to bear the title *Spiritual Exercises*, in which she invited her readers to prayerfully reflect on solemn religious events in their own past, such as baptism and monastic profession, in order to discover new meanings in them. The *Spiritual Exercises* of Abbot García de Cisneros of Montserrat anticipated and inspired the more famous *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola who was briefly a retreatant at Montserrat. Cisneros's exercises invite the ascetic practitioner to punctuate the monastic timetable with specific prayers and meditations intended to raise the soul over a four-week period from ethical purification to the contemplation of God in creation, and finally to a sense of mystical union. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, in contrast, are guidelines for the director of a retreat wholly oriented towards discernment. For Ignatius the discernment of spirits is not the principal goal, but is rather the means to a higher end: namely, the discovery of clear direction in the form of God's will with regard to an important vocational choice. Ignatius's month-long *Exercises* are intended to enable the soul to discern 'Christ's banner' hovering over an important life choice, and then to form a clear resolution to follow it (*Spiritual Exercises*, Week 2, Day 4; Mullan 1914: 73–6).

LITURGICAL ASCETICISM

Psalmody

The practice of ritual prayer three times each day including the Lord's Prayer is attested in Christian texts of the late first century (*Didache* 8; Roberts 1886: 379). In the second and third centuries Tertullian (d. 225) and Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) increased the goal to five or more times a day, although the form and content of these prayers, aside from the use of the Lord's Prayer, is uncertain. In the fourth century psalmody, sung or cantillated recitation of the Psalter, became prominent in Christian worship, probably through the increasing influence of the growing monastic movement (McKinnon 1994: 505–7). Psalmody was both a form of prayer and an ascetical practice insofar as the chanting of psalms was considered an aid to attaining and maintaining the inner balance or harmony of the soul. Such power had long been attributed to music, and the philosopher-physician Galen recommended a kind of 'music therapy' consisting of certain modes or types of music to be used in specific emotional or psychological states to help calm and restore the inner *krasis* or 'attunement' of body and soul (Galen, *Doctrines*,

5.6.19–20; De Lacy 1978: 329–30). As has been described, Athanasius of Alexandria recommended specific psalms to be used in a way similar to Galen's prescriptions; and both Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian emphasized the healing power of psalmody interspersed with periods of silent prayer.

Throughout the fourth century the popularity of the Book of Psalms increased, and frequent, prolonged psalmody became common among the ascetics of Egypt, whose excesses in this regard Cassian tried to curb (*Institutes* 2.5.4–5; Ramsey 2000: 40). Nevertheless, in Coptic monasticism the practice of reciting the entire psalter in a single day acquired a pre-eminence that it retains to the present day. In the West the Rule of Benedict introduced a more moderate regime by distributing the psalms over a single week, dividing individual psalms or portions of longer psalms among the eight daily canonical offices of Vigils (Matins), Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline (Benedict, *Rule* 8–18; Fry 1981: 203–15). Additional daily psalmody in the Office of the Dead and the Office of the Blessed Virgin became the norm in Western medieval monasteries; and occasional zealous monastic reformers such as Peter Damian (d. 1072) attempted with only limited success to add one or more daily recited psalters to the Benedictine regime. This emphasis on the quantity rather than the quality of daily psalmody led to the disappearance in the liturgy of silent intervals between psalms, which had originally served to facilitate prayer and meditation on the meaning of the sacred text (Cassian, *Institutes* 2.11.1; Ramsey 2000: 44). Despite commentaries stressing the poetic beauty and hidden mystical meanings of the Psalms, psalmody tended to become either a *pensum*, an allotted work and religious obligation of monks, nuns, and clerics, or an ascetical exercise thought to expiate sins.

The Eucharist

From the fourth century in the Christian East and to a somewhat lesser extent also in the West, the celebration of the eucharist was regarded as a foretaste of heaven, an opportunity to participate in transforming rituals that healed, even divinized, the participant and refocused the contemplative's gaze on eschatological mysteries. This understanding was encouraged in commentaries such as *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* by (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c.500), *The Church's Mystagogy* by Maximus Confessor, and *On the Divine Liturgy* by Germanus of Constantinople (d. c.733). These commentaries depict the eucharistic liturgy as a spiritual exercise in which the soul may be mysteriously transfigured and reconsecrated to God. Strict rules requiring abstinence from sexual intercourse for various intervals before presiding at the liturgy meant that in the East where married priests became the norm, the eucharist was seldom celebrated daily outside of monasteries. In the West, however, where priestly celibacy was at least theoretically mandated, the possibility arose of daily or even more frequent celebrations of mass.

The homilies of Gregory the Great (d. 604) bear witness to a growing popular conviction that the frequent celebration of mass appeases the wrath of 'God the dread Lord'

and that stipended masses (i.e. masses for which a donation was made) can lessen or obviate the pain of the souls in purgatory (Gregory, *Homily 37 on the Gospels*; Hurst 1990: 332–8). During the Middle Ages in the West a new cadre of priests arose who were often incompetent to preach or validly celebrate any sacraments other than the eucharist, and whose sole function was the ascetical exercise of celebrating as many expiatory, stipended masses as possible. The late medieval *Golden Legend* provides fanciful allegories of every part of the Western eucharistic liturgy upon which the laity, who seldom received communion, were invited to meditate during mass.

The Western doctrine of transubstantiation that stresses the essential presence of Christ under the forms of bread and wine led to a desire to behold the consecrated elements during the liturgy as a kind of visual communion. This in turn led to the prolongation of those portions of the liturgy where the elements are elevated for veneration, and to liturgies that focus primarily on the exposed eucharistic wafer. These uniquely Western innovations remain popular today among modern Roman Catholics and some Anglicans, for whom these liturgical exercises are considered both ascetical and mystical.

Monologistic Prayer

The very ancient practice of monologistic prayer, the frequent or continuous recitation of a brief prayer-phrase, became increasingly prominent in the Christian East and West from the fourteenth century, although in the East it has generally been more common in monasteries than among the laity. It has often been encouraged as a substitution for the psalter of the divine office, especially among the illiterate, and as a penitential exercise offered in reparation for particular sins or failings, or as a suffrage (expiatory sacrifice) for the dead. The Egyptian Desert Fathers of the fourth century knew and seem to have occasionally engaged in some form of monologistic prayer; and in the early fifth century Cassian described the practice in detail (*Conference* 10; Ramsey 1997: 365–93). The formula Cassian recommends, ‘God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me’, although frequently encountered in liturgical prayer, did not become a popular formula for private monologistic prayer. In the West repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father or *Pater Noster*, were widely practised during the early Middle Ages, and strings of beads called *paternosters* could be purchased as an aid to keeping track of the number of times the prayer was repeated. From the thirteenth century the *paternoster* was supplemented with varying forms of the *Ave Maria*, a combination of Gabriel’s and Elizabeth’s salutations in Luke 1: 28 and 1:42. In the fifteenth century the *aves* and *paternosters* were linked to meditation on a fixed series of events in the lives of Jesus and Mary, producing the rosary that remains popular today among Roman Catholics. In the Eastern monastic tradition preference was given to brief prayers containing the name of Jesus, most commonly the formula, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’. The theologian Gregory Palamas (d. 1359) felt compelled by opponents of the ‘Jesus Prayer’ to provide a theological justification and defence of its practice. Unlike the Western rosary, the Jesus Prayer does not entail meditation on any specific religious

concepts or events: it is intentionally non-iconic. The goal is to allow the constant invocation of the name of Jesus through the prayer to 'draw the mind into the heart' in a spirit of *penthos*, sorrow for sins (Ware 1986: 175–6, 182–3).

PENITENTIAL ASCETICISM

Excommunication

The disappointing discovery that Christians remain capable of serious sin even after baptism necessitated the creation in the early church of a formal process of penance and restoration of which there are hints in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5: 5). At first such formal repentance after a serious lapse was permitted only once (*Shepherd of Hermas* 2.1/29.8; Crombie 1885: 21–2) following serious sins such as murder, apostasy, and adultery. It entailed an extended period of excommunication lasting a variable number of years, depending on the judgement of the bishop who imposed the sentence according to the seriousness and circumstances of the offence. The formal process included public acknowledgement of the sin followed by ritual exclusion from the most sacred parts of the Sunday liturgy, together with abstinence from holy communion for the duration of the sentence. In the fourth century Basil of Caesarea codified this practice in a series of canonical letters that list offences and prescribe a corresponding period of excommunication (Basil, *Letters* 188, 199, 217; Jackson 1895: 223–8, 236–40, 255–9). These canonical letters are still revered and applied in some Eastern churches today.

Substituted Penances

The relatively passive, if humiliating, practice of excommunication slowly gave way to a more active approach, influenced by the monastic custom of confession to a revered elder who would recommend a healing remedy. Also influential in the West were models of justice drawn from Celtic and Germanic legal practice. These permitted 'tariffed' or fixed but negotiable penalties. Instead of a protracted period of excommunication, arduous ascetical tasks could be undertaken by the penitent, or even performed by a community or person who agreed to shoulder some part of the penitent's burden. Penitential manuals of the fifth to the eighth centuries compiled and standardized substitutions for specific intervals of excommunication. The ascetical practices enjoined in these earliest handbooks are often severe and appear masochistic to modern sensibilities. They include long fasts, exposure to freezing weather, immersion in cold water for long periods, and spending nights on painful surfaces or in repugnant settings such as graves or tombs. These substituted penances also entailed protracted prayers, such as multiple recitations of the whole psalter and extended prayer in exaggerated, uncomfortable postures. Such extreme practices had been prefigured in the fifth- and sixth-century

Syriac monastic asceticism of the stylites (pillar-dwellers) dendrites (tree-dwellers), and wandering 'grazers' (Knowles 1969: 21; Chitty 1966: 16, 76). In the medieval West this tendency towards extreme penances often took the form of private or public flagellation, encouraged especially by the monastic reformer Peter Damian (d. 1072).

A Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Although initially reluctant to delegate their office to 'bind and loose' from sin (Matt. 16: 19), bishops in both East and West gradually accorded their priests the faculty of absolving penitents in a repeatable sacrament of penance and reconciliation. In the medieval West new handbooks appeared that encouraged milder penances adapted to the particular circumstances of the penitent. By 1214 annual confession to one's parish priest had become mandatory. Western theologians struggled to explain how the Pauline doctrine of unmerited grace and salvation could coexist with the developing tradition of the penitent's ascetical expiation of sin. Distinctions were made between original and actual sin, between temporal and eternal punishment, variously applying the merits of Christ, the saints, and the penitent's own ascetical efforts to one category or the other. The practice of indulgences, criticized by some even from its inception, invited the penitent to rely on the prayers and merits of the whole Communion of Saints rather than on one's own efforts. This had the positive effect of highlighting the role of the whole Christian community, living and dead, in the ascetical enterprise of expiating sin. However, the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century at first questioned then vehemently rejected the whole concept of indulgences and substituted penances, insisting that sincere repentance and faith in Christ are sufficient for full forgiveness, leaving no residue that needs to be dispelled through ascetical effort.

While theologically understandable, this dismantling of the penitential system necessarily resulted in a devaluation of the human effort involved in repentance and change. It neglects a truth embedded within the ascetical tradition: namely that just as vice is acquired through repeated choices and actions that destabilize inner balance and freedom, so virtue or spiritual healing requires both the grace of God and the deliberate choices and repeated actions of the penitent.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage to sites associated with religious founders and teachers is a tradition Christianity shares with other world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Judaism, too, once emphasized pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem; but the destruction of the Temple in 70, the transformation of Jerusalem into the Roman City of Aelia Capitolina, and restriction of Jewish presence in the city following the Bar-Kokhba revolt of 132–6 rendered Jewish pilgrimage to the Holy City impossible. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 313, his building programmes at the

presumed site of Jesus' burial, and the example of his pious and energetic Christian mother, Helena, gave impetus to Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and other sites associated with Jesus and his apostles. Around 333 a pilgrim from Bordeaux wrote brief descriptions of sites he visited in Jerusalem and its environs, together with a more extensive list of stages in his route from Gaul to Palestine (*The Bordeaux Pilgrim*; Stewart 1887). About fifty years later the Spanish nun Egeria wrote a more detailed travel-diary that attests to the popularity of Christian pilgrimage not only to sites associated with Jesus, but also to monasteries where monks offered spiritual counsel, a practice described in detail by John Cassian and Palladius. Egeria's diary also reveals the popularity of sites associated with Christian martyrs and their relics (see Egeria, *Diary of a Pilgrimage*; Gingras 1970). Rome which boasted the tombs of Peter and Paul was a popular destination for pilgrims, as was Edessa in Syria, where Egeria was shown the *Letter to Abgar*, allegedly written by Jesus himself, and where several decades later a miraculous portrait of Jesus' face, the *Mandylion*, would be exhibited for the veneration of pilgrims.

Christian veneration of martyrs and their relics is described as early as the mid to late second century (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18; Roberts 1885a: 43). The transfer or *translation* of relics or portions of relics from the site of the original martyrdom to other churches facilitated the creation of pilgrimage sites throughout the Christian Roman Empire, including the imperial city of Constantinople. During the Middle Ages Compostela in Spain came to be revered as the site of St James's relics, while in Germany the apostle Matthias and the robe of Christ were venerated in Trier, and all three Magi were claimed by the cathedral in Cologne. The martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170 established Canterbury as an international pilgrimage site until the Reformation; and modern apparitions of the Virgin Mary have resulted in regular organized pilgrimages to cities in Portugal (Fatima), France (Lourdes), Egypt (Zaitoun, Cairo), and indeed throughout the world.

Christian pilgrimage has thus been popular almost from the beginning and remains so today; however, the significance of pilgrimage as an ascetical practice has varied over the centuries. During the fifth and sixth centuries, especially in the Celtic monastic tradition, the concept of pilgrimage took on a penitential quality through association with the ominous penalty of exile. Missionary activity was envisioned as a voluntary, heroic pilgrimage for Christ whereby one abandoned the safety of clan and culture to travel dangerous roads for the sake of the gospel. The tradition of pilgrimage was combined with the ideals of martyrdom and the Old Testament concept of holy warfare in the proclamation of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II (d. 1099).

Fascination with sites imbued with a sense of sacred history has perennially been coupled with an expectation of supernatural manifestations, such as prophecy and miraculous healings. But from at least the fourth century Christian pilgrimage to sacred sites has also been associated with the desire for personal transformation mediated by sacred relics, living spiritual guides, or some other aspect of God's presence unique to the holy place. An important mystical goal of pilgrimage has always been the hope for a deepened sense of communion with God by means of physical contact with a place rendered holy by Christ or the saints. The need to prepare oneself spiritually for such an

encounter has always been taken for granted, and opportunities for extended prayers and sacramental celebrations are often available at the site. The fact that travel to a distant locale was often arduous and dangerous in the past, and that it also entailed prolonged separation from family and friends, added an ascetic and often penitential aspect to the experience. For those unable to travel, pilgrimage to the Jerusalem *via dolorosa* was domesticated in the medieval West through pictorial 'stations of the cross' that remain an important feature of Roman Catholic churches today. 'Making the Stations' in a slow, penitential progress around the church remains a very popular form of Western ascetical practice. Veneration of successive icons in Orthodox churches serves an analogous purpose; however, the icon is not necessarily a focus for penitential meditation but serves rather a kind of sacred window into the presence of the saint or sacred event depicted.

Dispossession for Availability

Beginning in the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and his followers carried the asceticism of dispossession to a new extreme through their efforts to imitate the lifestyle of Christ as closely as possible and devote themselves to 'lady poverty'. They sought to negate as far as possible the concept of personal or corporate ownership, whether of property or the necessities of daily life. Abandoning as well the monastic tradition of stable communities in fixed locations, Francis's 'brothers' or *fratres* ('friars') adopted a lifestyle of peripatetic begging, deliberately rendering themselves dependent for their survival on the charity of others. This mendicant lifestyle had long been prefigured by wandering ascetics in the Eastern churches; however, with Francis's followers it acquired in the West formal approval by the hierarchy and it offered the possibility of participation or imitation of that lifestyle by lay persons eager to follow the friars' example.

With the passing of time Francis's followers were compelled by necessity to establish organized communities on property ostensibly owned by others, but they maintained a mode of Christian asceticism that refused to be defined by the older Benedictine model of stability to a place or particular community. Their stability and loyalty were to the concept of the whole Order, divided into regional provinces within which personnel could be shuffled as needed for the sake of work or communal harmony. In contrast to abbeys, traditionally built in remote locales, the friars' mendicant existence necessitated their settling in towns and cities, where they soon felt called to minister to the poor with whom they lived in solidarity. Their lifestyle was partially adopted by Dominic de Guzmán (d. 1221) whose Dominicans ('Order of Preachers') represent a second form of friars, who quickly embraced both the ministry of preaching to the laity and of teaching in the newly founded universities of Europe.

The ideal of extreme dispossession that frees the ascetic practitioner for the noble works of education, teaching, and service of the poor won adherents among clergy and laity alike, who were able to formally identify with both Franciscan and Dominican ideals through membership in 'third orders' affiliated to the friars. Such lay affiliates also served as living reminders that many significant aspects of extreme poverty are

unattainable by those who take vows in religious orders. While members of religious orders in both East and West make a point of doing without certain conveniences and luxuries, they remain insulated by the support of their communities from the social and psychological torments that continually haunt the truly poor, such as daily uncertainty concerning shelter, food, and livelihood.

The asceticism of radical dispossession as a means of identifying with the poor and of serving the spiritual and educational needs of others continues to have relevance today. The need for a nearly universal restructuring of human lifestyle in order to safeguard natural resources is becoming daily more evident. The limiting of wasteful human activity may be necessary for the survival of the human species. It is possible that, if more widely embraced, the asceticism of the friars may help serve not only the mystical goal of serving and seeing the other as Christ, but also of helping safeguard nature and the terrestrial environment and thus preserving these goods for future generations.

Labour and Service

The concept of labour or gainful employment as an ascetical exercise is alluded to in the New Testament (Eph. 4: 28; 2 Thess. 3: 11; Col. 3: 23) and is more clearly expressed in early Christian monastic rules. The earliest cenobitic communities founded by Pachomius (d. 346) engaged in agriculture and fishing, and the Rule of Benedict (c.540) mandates manual labour as part of the monk's ascetical regime. Desert Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries recommended that psalmody or monologistic prayer should accompany the *askēsis* of manual labor (*Alphabetical Sayings*, Antony 1; Ward 1975: 1; Barsanuphius, *Letter* 143; Chrysavgis 2006: 165–7). The Rule of Benedict similarly assigned spiritual value to mundane tasks, giving them a quasi-contemplative character (Benedict, *Rule* 31; Fry 1981: 226–9), and provided a schedule of psalms arranged in such a way that the shortest and easiest to memorize could be recited in the fields while engaging in seasonal agricultural labour or other work (Benedict, *Rule* 48; Fry 1981: 248–53). Initially such labour interspersed with prayer was regarded as a means of keeping the mind focused on God during work; later sources came to see it as a means of consecrating the tasks themselves, of intentionally offering labour and service as a gift to God.

Service of others, especially the poor and defenceless, has also taken on the character of an ascetical practice in Christianity. From the beginning, Christians have been expected to implement Jesus' ethical precepts of compassion towards all. Early patristic texts attest to particular concern for the state of those most vulnerable and unable to defend themselves, including especially the poor, widows, infants, and the unborn (*Didache* 2; Roberts 1886: 377–8; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19–20; Roberts 1885b: 148–9). Over time, the expression of this charity has increasingly taken on institutional forms. In the early church the clerical order of deacons was chiefly responsible for caring for the poor and vulnerable. In the Christian East, Basil of Caesarea entrusted the care of the sick to monks. Throughout the Middle Ages, religious orders and lay societies arose that specialized in particular forms of social service, such as vocational and liberal education, nursing, and care of the poor. The Mercedarian Order was founded in 1218 for the

ransom of Christian slaves. Camillus de Lellis (d. 1614) founded an order for the care of the sick, especially victims of plague. Vincent de Paul (d. 1660) founded an order of priests and an order of nuns to educate and care for the poor. In the nineteenth century Florence Nightingale (d. 1910), an English Protestant, adapted the training methods and practices of a German Lutheran nursing order to effectively create the secular profession of nursing. Other modern examples include: Eastern Orthodox religious communities devoted to the care of the sick and poor; Albert Schweizer (d. 1965), a Protestant biblical scholar and missionary physician in Gabon, Africa; and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (d. 1997), foundress of the Missionary Daughters and Missionary Brothers of Charity, two religious orders dedicated to the care of the homeless and the dying. The organizations founded or inspired by these individuals often provide a variety of means by which those who wish to affiliate themselves to their work may share to some extent in their asceticism of service.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter the terms asceticism and *askēsis* have been interpreted in the sense according to which they were understood in the earliest Christian sources that regularly employ them: namely, Athanasius's *Life of Antony* and the writings of Evagrius Ponticus. In these sources asceticism comprises the whole realm of practices or exercises that Christians undertake as part of the *praktikē*, the quest for moral virtue and spiritual freedom that prepares the soul both for contemplation of God in creation (*physikē*/natural contemplation) and for the ineffable contemplation of God beyond words and images (*theologikē*/contemplation of the divine nature). Asceticism, thus understood, comprises a wide range of spiritual practices that must be constantly assessed and employed as needed in the maintenance of spiritual balance. Asceticism is not an end in itself, but is rather a means of cooperating with God in a process of ongoing transformation whereby the grace of Christ is received, incorporated into a Christian lifestyle, and then shared with others.

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Gregg (1980); Aumann (1980); Sinkewicz (2003); Jones (1986); Spidlik (1986).

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CHAPTER 10

PRAYER

PETER TYLER

EARLY ARTICULATIONS

CHRISTIAN prayer has been called a ‘subtle nothingness’ (Finley 1978: 2) and throughout its 2,000-year history Christians have struggled to articulate that nothingness in a form of words that attempts to describe the indescribable. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the tradition of mystical theology. Although this struggle would pre-occupy the medieval writers of the *theologia mystica* to a great extent, already in the early Christian centuries writers were struggling to articulate the nature of prayer and its place within Christian life. In this respect the early history of the *theologia mystica* is one that struggles to incorporate or react to the pre-existent Platonic schemas for contemplation as found in key figures such as Plotinus and Iamblichus. Thus, the Platonic schema of the soul and its relationship to God would interact with and help the early Christian world in its pursuit of the transcendent.

Plato’s early picture of *psyche* in the *Phaedo* as a simple unity connected with the divine and able to reincarnate was elaborated and developed in the later dialogues to take into account the warring elements within the self and how they could be reconciled with the ultimate ‘moral’ end of the self—restoration of the self with the divine soul and harmony with the cosmos.¹ This was accompanied by an increasing interest in the cosmology of the *psyche* and how it may relate to *Nous* as a cosmic principle—the famous metaphysical speculation of the *Timaeus*. Thus prayer in this Platonic conception is concerned with restoring unity to a fractured *psyche*, especially by reconnecting the individual *psyche* with the greater *Nous* or ‘World Soul’. Therefore the great Neoplatonic writers such as Plotinus elaborate forms of this struggle with a notion that expounds a

¹ Note Armstrong here: ‘For a pagan Greek, to say that the soul was not merely *theios*, divine, but *theos*, a god, did not necessarily mean more than that it was an immortal being. *Theos* is a word of very vague and various meaning, and certainly no pagan Platonist thought that all beings called *theoi* were identical with or parts of the Absolute Good, the Supreme Body, the Creator of heaven and earth (in the Christian sense)’ (Armstrong 1967: 6).

threefold hierarchy in the universe, where *Nous* proceeds from the One and *psyche* (including our individual *psyche*) from *Nous*:

There is the One beyond being, of such a kind as our argument wanted to show, so far as demonstration was possible in these matters, and next in order there is Being, that is *Nous*, and the nature of *psyche* is the third place.

(Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.10; Armstrong 1966–88: v. 45–6)

Our individual soul will thus replicate and reflect this hierarchy in its structure:

He who intends to know what *Nous* really is must know *psyche* and the divine part of *psyche*... what remains of soul (after separation from body) is that which we said was an image of *Nous* presenting something of its light like the light of the sun.

(Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.9; Armstrong 1966–88: v. 101)

And this divine light of creation and *Nous* is exactly what is intimated in the individual soul when it engages in contemplation/*theoria* (an activity not confined to humanity but found in all manifestations of the cosmos—rocks, planets, birds, trees, and so on):

All goes on noiselessly, for there is no need of any obvious external contemplation or action; it is *psyche* which contemplates... Contemplation and vision have no limits.... the same vision is in every soul for it is not spatially limited.

(Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.8.5; Armstrong 1966–88: iii. 377)

Thus, in summary, for Plotinus the One emanates *Nous* which in turn emanates *psyche* and thus from our *psyche* we can return to the One via contemplation in *Nous*. Contemplation and prayer will play a key role in Plotinus's scheme for it is by this means we return to our source.² Drawing on the Platonic legacy of the *Phaedrus*, Plotinus associates this contemplative capacity of *theoria* with the rational faculty or *logiston* of the self which can then bring the lower *epithumia* and *thumos* back towards the *Nous* and ultimately the One (Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.8.5; Armstrong 1966–88: iii. 377).³

Whether they agreed with these Platonic notions or not all early Christian writers of mystical theology felt the need to develop understandings of prayer that incorporated or rejected them. In this respect two writers, Origen and Augustine, may serve as exemplars of how early Christian understanding of prayer built upon this Platonic framework.

² As Armstrong puts it: 'He shows contemplation as the source and goal of all action and production at every level: all life for him is essentially contemplation' (Plotinus, *Enneads*; Armstrong 1966–88: iii. 358).

³ Although difficult to give exact English equivalents, *epithumia* may perhaps be translated as the 'sensual' part of the self and *thumos* as the fiery part of the self which is closely connected with individual pride or dignity. For more on this see Tyler 2016.

Origen

Origen possesses an essentially optimistic view of creation and matter where all souls, through the natural action of goodness, will ultimately be reconciled to God.⁴ As Tripolitis puts it:

In a manner similar to Plotinus and other contemporary Platonists, Origen maintained that man's goal in life should be to realize his true nature, which is divine, and to strive to regain his original pure state and likeness to God.

(Tripolitis 1978: 122)

Thus, in interpreting Genesis 1: 26–7 Origen maintains that we are created in the image of God but have not yet acquired the likeness of God. The *Logos* became incarnate to hasten this trend so that the journey back to the Father is possible by believing in Christ and constantly imitating him. As also found in the Plotinian view, the goal of humanity is to be refashioned into the likeness of God, or, as Origen puts it in *De Principiis* (*On the Origins*):

Moses, before all other philosophers, describes the first creation of man in these words: 'And God said, Let Us make man in Our own image, and after Our likeness' ... Now the expression, 'In the image of God created He him,' without any mention of the word 'likeness,' conveys no other meaning than this, that man received the dignity of God's image at his first creation; but that the perfection of his likeness has been reserved for the consummation, namely, that he might acquire it for himself by the exercise of his own diligence in the imitation of God, the possibility of attaining to perfection being granted him at the beginning through the dignity of the divine image, and the perfect realization of the divine likeness being reached in the end by the fulfilment of the (necessary) works The highest good, they say, is to become as like to God as possible.

(Origen, *De Principiis* 3.6.1; Crouzel and Simonetti 1978–84: iii. 237,
my tr. from the Latin)

Following this line of thought, in the 27th treatise of the *Homily on the Book of Numbers*, Origen accordingly sets out the stages of the soul's ascent to God as an allegorical interpretation of Israel's exodus from Egypt.⁵ However, complete union cannot be attained

⁴ Origen and Plotinus shared a common tutor in Neoplatonic thought—Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria—which may explain the 'family resemblance' between their two systems of contemplation (see Tyler 2016: 79–83).

⁵ Step 1, self knowledge and understanding—'know thyself'; step 2, take up the struggle against sin and passions (27.6); step 3, reach *apatheia*—'moral freedom and sovereignty' (27.6); step 4, detachment from marriage—recommends celibacy and asceticism; step 5, the 'watchtower'—the 'soul has a distant view of the splendours in store' (27.9, cf. *Enneads* 4.4.5); step 6, the rational and irrational struggle for control—gift of visions and discernment of spirits (27.11 and *Princ.* 3.2.1–7); step 7, arrival at state of blessedness—gnosis; step 8, becomes a minister to help others (27.12); step 9, the last stage: *ekstasis*—the

in this life while clothed with the mortal body (Origen, *De Principiis* 3.6.3; Crouzel and Simonetti 1978–84: iii. 241). Therefore, unlike in Plotinus's schema, this cannot happen in this life for it is a gradual process taking many aeons (Origen, *De Principiis* 3.6.6; Crouzel and Simonetti 1978–84: iii. 247–51). So we have a process that begins with moral purification, then leads to knowledge that enables us to discern the real from the unreal and ends with the *Logos* united with the spirit. Unlike the Platonists such as Plotinus, Origen, as a Christian, makes a place for the incarnate *Logos* in our long return to union with the divine image through contemplation where prayer helps us escape the snares of our fallen state and return to the bliss of perfection in the Godhead. Thus, Origen's system appears as a fascinating 'half-way house' between Platonic and Christian thinking on the role of contemplation and prayer in developing the soul, and we could even go so far as to see it as a tantalizing vision of a lost Christian-Platonic way that was posited but not followed by the emerging church. Condemned (along with Evagrius) by several early Church Councils beginning in 399 it was clearly seen as too Platonic by the early church.

Through writers such as Evagrius and Cassian, Origen's notion of a self divided against itself will become a familiar trope in the later desert schools which will subsequently be of such importance to the Western monastic tradition. Key Origenistic images such as the falling away of the soul from God in the 'cooling', the need for purification of the 'higher part of the soul', and the possibility of vision of the *Nous* in this life, will all become part of the terminology of the desert dwellers as Origen's Neoplatonic thoughts appeared to find a more receptive audience away from the centres of church authority in the cities. Origen's preferred term for the Church was the *schola animarum*—the 'school of souls'—and his notion of the Christian life as a slow progress of the soul from 'cooling to warming' will become one enshrined in the desert tradition:

I think, therefore, that all the saints who depart from this life will remain in some place situated on the earth, which holy Scripture calls paradise, as in some place of instruction, and, so to speak, class-room or school of souls, in which they are to be instructed regarding all the things which they had seen on earth, and are to receive also some information respecting things that are to follow in the future, as even when in this life they had obtained in some degree indications of future events, although 'through a glass darkly,' all of which are revealed more clearly and distinctly to the saints in their proper time and place.

(Origen, *De Principiis* 2.11.6; Crouzel and Simonetti 1978–84: i. 407–11,
my tr. from the Latin)

Prayer and contemplation—the development of the *nous* through *theoria*—will ultimately vouchsafe the vision of God in union that we desire:

And in all things this food is to be understood as the contemplation and understanding of God, which is of a measure appropriate and suitable to this nature, which was

seeker is completely possessed by the *logos* and has intuitive contemplative knowledge of God (Origen, *Homilies on the Book of Numbers*, ch. 27; Scheck 2009: 168–83).

made and created; and this measure it is proper should be observed by every one of those who are beginning to see God, i.e., to understand Him through purity of heart.

(Origen, *De Principiis* 2.11.7; Crouzel and Simonetti 1978–84: i. 411–13, my tr. from the Latin)

Thus if we turn to Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostica*, we find a pre-existing cosmology that is reflective of Origen and Plotinus, allying Evagrius's work closer to the Platonic tradition than that which will later be associated with Augustine. Thus, at the beginning of creation there is a single *Henad*, that is 'a single undivided integral whole whose nature was pure intelligence' (Bamberger 1981: p. lxxv). As with Origen, we then see a falling away from this original purity as a second creation takes place, as spirits fall from original innocence to a muddled existence darkened by matter. The fate of each spirit is determined by their guilt, affecting into which bodies they fall: 'they pass into bodies that are more or less material, more or less dark, more or less thick'. Angels, as bodies of fire (much as in Origen's schema), are not affected by matter, whereas human beings, formed of earth, are mired in sensuality. Devils have the darkest bodies, being most immersed in matter: 'amongst the angels and saints there is a predominance of *nous*, amongst humans there is a predominance of *epithumia*, amongst the demons there is a predominance of *thumos*' (Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, first century, 1.68; Bamberger 1981: 48–9).

Therefore the soul or *psyche* of the individual person is a piece of the original *Nous* of the cosmos; it is also the source of affectivity and the passions. In angels *nous* predominates whilst in humans the *psyche* comprises this *nous* mixed primarily with *epithumia*. In devils it is *nous* mixed with *thumos* that predominates.⁶ Angels possess the *theoria* of God (Bamberger 1981: p. lxxviii) to which humankind can strive by purification (Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, fifth century, 5.6; Bamberger 1981: 178–9).

Apatheia

Following Origen, Evagrius thus sees one of the key elements of prayer as the overcoming of the passions or the *apatheia* of the *psyche*, connected with the vision of the 'purity of the soul' (Bamberger 1981: p. lxxxii). Bamberger argues that because of its use in the *Gospel of Thomas*, it 'is not unlikely that this theme formed an element of the primitive catechesis and derived from the teaching of our Lord himself', therefore '*apatheia*, far from being a mere transposition of the Stoic experience, is rather akin to the fear of the Lord. Still more significantly, it is parent to love, *agape*.' In the Evagrian schema it is the means by which we shall be reunited with the *Nous* of the Creator:

Apatheia is what we shall call the soul's health, and the soul's food is knowledge, which is the only means by which we shall ordinarily be united with the holy powers.

(Evagrius, *Praktikos* 56; Bamberger 1981: 31)

⁶ Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, third century, 3.34; Bamberger 1981: 110–11: 'The demon is the reasoning nature which, because of its abundance of *thumos*, has fallen from its service of God.'

As with Augustine, and unlike Plotinus, grace is essential in Evagrius's conception of the pursuit of *apatheia* (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 100; Bamberger 1981: 41) as it is not an entirely man-made state, but requires the ministration of priests and the reception of the sacraments: 'conceived by obedience *apatheia* is preserved by fear of the Lord. It is nourished and grows through the practice of humility and the cultivation of sorrow for sin' (Bamberger 1981: p. lxxxv; see also Evagrius, *Praktikos* 60, 77, 81) for it is never stable, always relying upon the grace of God and always open to demonic assault. As he states in *Praktikos*, chapter 33:

Recall your former way of life and your old faults, and how, when you were subject to passions, you crossed over to *apatheia* by the mercy of Christ.

(Evagrius, *Praktikos* 33; Bamberger 1981: 25)

So Evagrius's *apatheia* is more about love/*agape* than indifference and is the goal of Christian life: 'the Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things' (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 2; Bamberger 1981: 15). This conception of *apatheia* will work its way into John Cassian's *Conferences* as '*puritas cordis*' (Cassian, *Conferences* 1.4; (tr. Ramsey) 1997: 43), and thence into the Western monastic tradition via St Benedict of Nursia. Yet *apatheia* is not an end in itself. In the *Chapters on Prayer* 57, Evagrius talks about a higher state of *theoria* of the blessed Trinity which leads to *gnosis* which he describes as an experiential knowledge of God given directly by the Almighty. So we have before us a movement from *apatheia* to *physike theoria* to *theoria* of the Blessed Trinity and finally *gnosis* of the experience of God. As Bamberger states, Evagrius gives no precise description of these final states (Bamberger 1981: p. xc) but rather associates them with the phenomena of light (an association that occurs again in the writings of Gregory Palamas).

When the spirit has put off the old man to replace him with the new man, created by charity, then he will see that his own state at the time of prayer resembles that of a sapphire; it is as clear and bright as the very sky. The Scriptures refer to this experience as the place of God which was seen by our ancestors, the elders, at Mount Sinai.

(Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, PG 40:1244A, my tr.)

This is because we are effectively returning to the primordial *Nous* as inherited by Evagrius from Origen and ultimately derived, as we have seen, from Plato. In this respect Evagrius mirrors Plotinus and other late classical Neoplatonists.

St Augustine

St Augustine, by contrast, famously turns his back on the Platonic tendencies of his youth to develop a schema for the soul in prayer that will have an enormous impact on consequent Christian thought. Yet, as Trapè reminds us, 'the essential task of Augustinian spirituality is the restoration of the image of God to man' (Trapè 1986: 454),

or as Augustine himself puts it in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis*: 'It was in the very factor in which he surpasses non-rational animate beings that man was made in God's image. That, of course, is reason (*ratio*) itself, or *mens* (mind) or *intelligentia* (intelligence) or whatever we wish to call it' (Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 3.20.30; tr. Hill 2002: 234). As we have already seen, the chief aim of the Platonic ascent to the divine was to develop the individual *psyche* such that it could contemplate the World *Nous* and thus ultimately the One. Whilst clearly influenced by the Platonic model, Augustine presents us with a significantly modified picture. In *On the Trinity*, he describes the 'image' of the divine in the human soul—in particular with reference to memory, will, and understanding (books 9–15 of *On the Trinity*).⁷ For Plotinus the *theoria* of the intellect will lead us to the *Nous*. Augustine, on the other hand, prefers memory as the attribute of the *psyche* most likely to bring us to the divine. It should also be noted that as discussion of the personality moves from Greek to Latin the Platonic tripartite soul begins to dissolve in favour of the more monic Augustinian self which, although reflecting the triune God in its component parts, seems more integrated than the somewhat wayward parts of the Platonic triadic *psyche*. As well as reflecting the triune life in its constituent parts Augustine, in contrast to the Platonists, places Christ as the key mediator and educator of the soul. Christ, for Augustine, is 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14: 6) and as he says in his *Homily on the Psalms* 84.1: 'The Lord himself heals the eyes of our hearts to enable us to see what he shows us' (Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*; Boulding 2001–2: 204).

Intimacy with the *persona Christi* in prayer will thus lead to the divinization of the soul, not through our own efforts or through merits of our own, but simply through the love and grace of God freely given (in contrast to the Platonic way where our own effort, contemplation/*theoria* will inevitably lead to union with the divine): 'the Son of God was made a sharer in our mortal nature so that mortals might become sharers in his Godhead' (Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 52.6; Boulding 2001–2: 38–40) and 'it is quite obvious that God called human beings "gods" in the sense that they were deified by his grace, not because they were born of his own substance... he alone deifies who is God of himself, not by participation in any other' (Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 49.1.2; Boulding 2001–2: 381). Thus God deifies us only by adoption, through no quality inherent in our own natures (unlike in the Neoplatonic schema). Possibly from his Manichean past, Augustine had a lifelong suspicion of matter and the flesh and saw human nature as essentially corrupt. He was suspicious of our ability to achieve deification from this corrupted flesh by our own means and so championed the power of God's grace over any Pelagian notions of what we would nowadays refer to as 'original blessing'. In this respect the body of Christ on earth, the church, remained the *sine qua non* for reaching the state of bliss denied us by our nature. Although glimpses of this could be afforded in this life the true union would not be possible for Augustine in this world. As he states at the outset of the *Confessions*: 'the house of my soul is too small for you to

⁷ In a number of articles Bernard McGinn has drawn attention to the difference between 'likeness' (*similitudo*) and 'image' (*imago*) of the soul to God in Augustine's writings (e.g. McGinn 1991: 243–4).

enter, make it more spacious by your coming. It lies in ruins: rebuild it' (Augustine, *Confessions* 1.6; Watts 1928: 13–19, my tr.).

Ecstasy

In common with his Platonic brethren, Augustine believes that sudden experiences of the Godhead are possible in prayer, even during our sojourn in this vale of tears. This is especially the case in the *Confessions*: in the event in Milan recorded in books 9–13 (Volume 2) (Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.24; Watts 1928: 48–49), he talks of the *ictu cordis*—the sudden 'blow on the heart' of ecstasy. As he writes in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis*: 'When however the attention of the mind is totally turned aside and snatched away from the senses of the body, then you have what is more usually called ecstasy' (Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 12.25; Hill 2002: 477). And in the *Confessions*: 'From time to time you lead me into an inward experience quite unlike any other, a sweetness beyond understanding. If ever it is brought to fullness in me my life will not be what it is now, though what it will be I cannot tell you' (Augustine, *Confessions* 10.40.65; Watts 1928: 195–7, my tr.). The ecstasy is a *foretaste* of the bliss to come—this bliss cannot be attained in full in this realm. Book 12 of the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* is given over to a lengthy exposition of the topic. Here he details 'three kinds of vision' possible with or without the involvement of the body: the 'bodily' (*corporale*) 'because it is perceived through the body and present to the senses of the body;' the 'spiritual' (*spirituale*) which is 'not of the body' and the 'intellectual' (*intellectuale ab intellectu*) which is 'of the intellect.' In this passage he is clear in distinguishing *psyche/mens* from spirit/*pneuma* in his exposition of texts from St Paul. In this respect Augustine is clearly influenced by the Pauline sense of *psyche*. As he concludes 'bodily vision reports back to spiritual and spiritual in its turn reports back to intellectual', for 'such ecstasies are strange and wonderful indeed' (Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 12.24; Hill 2002: 476–7)—a fact he expounds by numerous strange and curious examples verging on the paranormal.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS: ST TERESA OF AVILA

These early understandings of prayer as expounded by the Fathers will continue to arise in later mystical writings within the tradition. Thus, by the time we reach the writings of St Teresa of Avila in sixteenth-century Spain we see that her descriptions of prayer contain elements of what we can term the 'Neoplatonic' and 'Augustinian' strands alike. In chapters 8–10 of *The Book of the Life*, she contrasts the peace she receives from the activity of *oración mental*⁸ with the 'war so troublesome' where she would frequently 'fall and rise' (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 8.2; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 60) as her passions

⁸ Literally 'mental prayer', however the common English terms 'mindfulness' or 'heartfulness' would not be out of place as a translation (see Tyler 2013).

came and left her. Her mental prayer ‘drew her to the harbour of salvation’ (*The Book of the Life* 8.4; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 60). She refers to this prayer here and later as a ‘trato con Dios’, ‘an association of friendship, frequently practised on an intimate basis, with the one we know loves us’ (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 8.4; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 61). The pivotal word here is ‘trato’ that Teresa uses to convey the intimacy and immediacy of prayer. To overcome the whirring discourse of the intellect Teresa suggests the need to concentrate on the mindful ‘trato’ with the beloved. As she says later in chapter 13 of *The Book of the Life*: ‘therefore it is of great importance, when we begin to practise prayer, not to be intimidated by thoughts, and believe you me, for I have had experience of this’ (Teresa of Avila, *Life* 13.7; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 79).

As Teresa’s experience as a writer and pray-er progresses, she does not seem to alter the fundamental perceptions of the nature of the life as prayer as outlined in the early *Life*. What does change, however, is her ability to convey the exact subtle meaning regarding prayer-discourse in her writings. Indeed, as time goes on she seems to entrench the studied imprecision of *The Life*, enshrining in her writings the principle that the life of prayer/contemplation *by its very nature* resists the hard-edged analysing of the discursive intellect. In this respect, as I have argued here and elsewhere, her attempt to patrol the boundaries of the ineffable are as precise and subtle as any contemporary linguistic philosopher (Tyler 2011).

Her caution seems to stem from the essential core of ‘unknowing’ that she feels lies at the heart of prayer as the discursive intellect gives way to the subtler levels of mindfulness. As she writes in a letter to her collaborator Jerónimo Gracián in mid-April 1579: ‘Oh Good God! How true it is that we do not know ourselves!’ (Teresa of Avila, *Letters*; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 1205–6). She even goes so far, in a letter to the sisters of Seville, to counsel them against writing about prayer:

I am not in favour of these sisters writing about prayer for this has many drawbacks which I would like to tell you about. You should know that even though doing this amounts to nothing but a waste of time, it hinders the soul from walking in freedom and allows one to imagine all kinds of things.

(Letter to Madre María de San José, 28 March 1578;
Efrén and Steggink 1997: 1145)

For we are talking about:

Things of import never to be forgotten and if they are forgotten then there is no reason to talk of them... Because I understand the trouble they will run into from thinking about what they should write and from what the devil can put into their head I insist so much on this.... It is better to praise the Lord, who gives these graces, and when they have passed to let them be, for it is the soul that will experience the benefit.

The thrust of the advice is the necessity to ‘let the soul be’, not to over-intellectualize or analyse the process of meditation so that thereby the person comes to a position where

awareness occurs naturally—‘organically,’ as it were. Such prayer, as she writes to her brother Lorenzo in early 1577:

Is certainly beyond what you can understand and the beginning of many blessings.... It is a great affliction and pain that comes without one’s knowing how, and most tasty (*sabrosísima*). And although, as a matter of fact, it is a wound caused by the love of God in the soul, one doesn’t know where it comes from or how, or whether it is a wound or what it is, but it feels this tasty pain (*ese dolor sabrosa*) that makes it complain and so it says: ‘Without wounding you cause pain, and without pain you wear away the love of creatures.’

(Letter to Don Lorenzo de Cepeda, 17 January 1577;
Efrén and Steggink 1997: 1074)

All this, she tells us, requires humility, not ‘the talk of wise and learned men’ (i.e. speculative theology) for God ‘enjoys more these crudities of a humble shepherd, who He knows has more to say, than the most systematic (ordered, refined) theologies if they do not come with a certain humility’ (Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* (Escorial Codex) 37.4; Efrén and Steggink 1997: 330). This mindfulness is in contrast to the speculative theology which she had heard described in Francisco de Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet* as a young woman. For such mindfulness, as she had stated in the *Life*, and now repeats, is in contrast to the dissatisfaction of those with a distracted soul:

There are some souls and understandings so scattered that they are like wild horses that cannot be stopped. Now they go this way, now that, always with lack of tranquillity (*siempre con desasosiego*) and although a skilled rider mounted on such a horse may not always be in danger—sometimes even he too—and even if he is not concerned about his life there will always be the risk of doing something untoward and so he must always proceed with great care.

(Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* (Escorial Codex) 30.2;
Efrén and Steggink 1997: 311–12)

This notion of the ‘unknowingness’ of prayer, so central to her thought, can be traced back to the medieval Neoplatonic tradition ultimately derived in Teresa’s case from the Dionysian tradition mediated by the Victorines, Jean Gerson, and Francisco de Osuna.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

In many respects Teresa’s writing on prayer represents an ending, or apotheosis, of the medieval synthesis of the Neoplatonic and Augustinian traditions of prayer that had been developed through the framework of Dionysius’s *theologia mystica*. On the other hand, her writings can be seen as a new beginning that will shape much that will come afterwards. In this respect her careful description and analysis of states of rapture and

ecstasy (following the passages of Augustine already explored) will set up patterns that many writers on the tradition will develop in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To conclude, I shall bring these reflections up to date with two great twentieth-century masters of mystical prayer: Edith Stein (St Teresa Benedicta a Cruce) and Thomas Merton, demonstrating how they take the essential apparatus of the Western tradition of mystical prayer and revitalize it with, in the case of Stein, Husserlian phenomenology, and in the case of Merton, his study of Zen Buddhism and Sufism.

Edith Stein: 'This is the Truth'

Born of a devout Jewish family in Breslau, Germany, Edith Stein—feminist, atheist, Jew, and Catholic—developed an early love and skill in philosophy which was to remain with her throughout her life. In 1921, whilst staying at the house of some friends—the Conrad-Martiuses—she looked through the bookshelves of her hosts and found Teresa of Avila's *Book of the Life*. She was not able to sleep that night and was completely gripped by the narrative that Teresa presented. Afterwards she would say of Teresa's book: 'This is the truth' (see Herbstrith 1992: 65). As she would write later 'it is just the people who at first passionately embrace the world who penetrate farthest into the depths of the soul. Once God's powerful hand has freed them from its allurements, they are taken into their innermost selves' (Stein 1962: 66).

She was baptized a Christian in 1922 and began an extended study of the Church Fathers and scripture, especially the works of St Thomas Aquinas. The next ten years were ones of teaching and work to reconcile Christian and atheist philosophy, in particular the phenomenology of her 'master' Husserl and the high scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas (as well as Dionysius the Areopagite and Teresa of Avila). From this time Stein was able to present in her works an essential synthesis between these medieval traditions of mystical prayer and her contemporary phenomenology.

The language of prayer for Stein was essentially a language of union and wholeness—a cipher for the locus where body, mind, heart, and spirit could be usefully identified and held in creative tension. From her early writings, then, she creates a picture of the soul and prayer where all four categories of being can be held together. As she puts it in the late commentary on Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, *Die Seelenburg*, the soul is 'the middle of the whole bodily, soulish and spiritual picture that we call *human*' (Stein 1962: 64). From Thomas she appreciates the Aristotelian notion of the soul as form of the body, whilst from Dionysius, on the other hand, she accepts the essential unknowing that lies at the heart of the self. This she deftly combines with what she sees as the dynamic sense of self that Teresa of Avila provides in her notion of the *Interior Castle*. As she puts it in *Endliches und Ewiges Sein*:

The soul is often spoken as a sort of 'space' (*Raum*) with 'depth' (*Tiefe*) and 'surface' (*Oberfläche*). In such fashion belongs the picture (*Bild*) of the 'castle of the soul' (*Seelenburg*), that has outer and inner chambers and ultimately an innermost abode.

The 'I' (*Ich*) inhabits this castle, and it may choose to reside in one of the outer chambers, or it may retire into a more inner one. The examples cited can help us to understand the sense of these pictures: they remain however always a necessary help (*Notbehelf*) to grasp relationships which are fully without space.

(Stein 1986: 398)

Only the person with a 'hot heart' who has seized the world could, she suggests (clearly in autobiographical terms but also reflecting St Augustine and Teresa), really appreciate the way of life that lies at the heart of the self. Thus, she concludes, the soul 'is a personal-spiritual picture within which is expressed the innermost and most actual, the essence, from which the person's strengths and ability to change arise. Not then an unknown X that we seek to clarify through experienced facts, but something which enlightens us and can be felt whilst always remaining mysterious' (Stein 1962: 67).

And this is exactly the point where Stein makes the same move as St Augustine—that is, to see in the inner contradiction and mysterious tension of the soul a reflection of the Trinity itself, available to the seeker through the act of contemplation. Thus, Stein's solution to the problem of the soul in post-modern context is essentially that envisaged by Augustine in *De Trinitate* and places her writing firmly in the Augustinian tradition. For her, the multiplicity of perspective of the soul is held in the unity of apperception which is Christ. Christ is the unity of perception that holds together all the contradictions of the *psyche*. In *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* she again characterizes the 'human being' (*menschliche Sein*) as being a composite of 'body, soul and spirit' (*leiblich-seelisch-geistig*) (Stein 1986: 336). The *Menschengeist* is determined 'from above' and 'from below'. Thus the soul for Stein consists of a choreography of *Geist*/spirit and *Leib*/body: 'the spiritual life of the human person rises from a dark ground. It rises like a candle-flame that illumines itself nourished by non-luminous matter.' The 'non-luminous matter' of the human body is to be distinguished (in true phenomenological fashion) from the matter which we perceive in the world around us. For, in contrast, *our* matter is matter that is *felt, experienced and innerly sensed*. This, for Stein, constitutes an essential layer and part of self—which is why she refers to it as *Leib* rather than *Körper*, as she says, 'What distinguishes the body from a corpse is that the body is an *ensouled* corpse' (Stein 1986: 338). Thus, the human self, as a composite of matter and spirit, is what for Edith is determining of the term 'soul' and reflects the Trinitarian nature of God: 'Therefore the human soul is not a mean between spirit and matter but a spiritual creature—not only a formed structure of the spirit but a forming spirit' (Stein 1986: 338).

This human choreography of *Leib* and *Geist* held together in the embrace of *Seele* is for Stein the reflection in the human person of the triune God of Christianity: 'the three-fold formative power of the soul must be regarded as a tri-unity, and the same is true of the end product of its forming activity: body-soul-spirit' (Stein 1986: 329) which thus becomes the goal of prayer. In prayer we re-enact this process as we trace once again the essential act of our creation out of the Trinity. If therefore, the person can see this when 'it then opens itself in its innermost being to the influx of divine life, the soul (and through it the body) is formed into an image of the Son of God' (Stein 1986: 290).

As she would later put it in *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, the last (uncompleted) work she began in 1941 as a commentary on St John of the Cross for the 400th anniversary of his birth:

Human beings are called upon to live in their inmost region and to have themselves as much in hand as possible only from that centre-point... It is God's mystery, which God alone can reveal to the degree that pleases him... God himself has chosen it as his dwelling. (Stein 1950: 142)

Edith went to her death at Auschwitz, possibly on 9 August 1942, the day on which she has been celebrated as St Teresa Benedicta at the Cross since 1998. Her untimely end, and the manner in which she undertook this last journey, reveals the important lesson that she has also derived from her master Teresa of Avila—that the aim of all prayer is 'good works, good works my sisters!' and that Christian mystical prayer, in enacting the mystery of the triune life in the soul, will inevitably lead to the cross and the redemptive suffering that Christ laid down for his followers.

Thomas Merton

I began this chapter with the 'subtle nothingness' used by James Finley in his description of Thomas Merton's writing on prayer. It is fitting then to conclude this brief survey with the thoughts of this other great master of twentieth-century mystical prayer. Like Stein, Merton's journey to mystical prayer began in the maelstrom of contradiction of the mid-twentieth-century secular world. From a relatively privileged background, the orphaned Merton became a bit of hell-raiser as an undergraduate at Cambridge University before being recalled to the United States and a more studious life at Columbia University. Here, like Stein, he was slowly drawn into religious life, finally entering the Cistercian Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane, Kentucky. One of his first acts (under obedience) on becoming a monk was to complete his best-selling memoir *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which would speak to the hearts and souls of post-war Americans in an unprecedented way. As Merton continued his vocation through the 1950s and 1960s (much of which writing I draw upon here) his notions of prayer were developed by his immersion in, *inter alia*, psychoanalysis, Zen, and Sufi writing. It was in conversation with a Sufi, Abdul Aziz, that he wrote in 1966:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centred entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on faith by which alone we can know the presence of God... My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence.

(Merton 1985: 62)

For Merton contemplation or, to use the phrase of his contemporary Simone Weil, 'awareness' was at the heart of Christian life. For Merton this was not just something for

‘religious professionals’ but something that was gifted to all Christians as their divine right. His whole life can thus be seen as an attempt at living with and trying to articulate the strange processes of the ‘subtle nothingness of prayer’. In one of his last books, *On Contemplative Prayer*, published posthumously, he states:

We should not look for a ‘method’ or ‘system,’ but cultivate an ‘attitude,’ an ‘outlook’: faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All these finally permeate our being with love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in the Spirit of God we ‘see’ God our Father without ‘seeing.’ We know him in ‘unknowing.’ (Merton 1996: 9)

As with Stein and Teresa, Merton here draws upon the Neoplatonic Dionysian tradition that places ‘divine unknowing’ at the heart of Christian prayer. Prayer and contemplation are not, then, an ‘add-on’ to life for Merton, they are at the heart of life. ‘It is the seriousness,’ Merton reminds us, ‘of breathing when you’re drowning’ (Baker and Henry 1999: 154). Once we recognize our nothingness and helplessness before God then we can begin to pray. From such a perspective, even a coldness or impossibility to begin prayer is in itself a sign of this helplessness before God—a sign of his grace towards us and the necessity for our dependence upon his grace. For, as he reminds us, ultimately there can only ever be one teacher of prayer—and that is the Holy Spirit. As with Stein and Teresa, such a prayer, such a *contemplatio*, is not a flight from the world, but leads us back into life, into the arms of the world:

[Monastic prayer]...is not so much a way to find God as a way of resting in him whom we have found, who loves us, who is near to us, who comes to us to draw us to himself. (Merton 1996: 4)

In such a vision of mystical prayer (or as he calls it here ‘monastic prayer’) all other distractions are dropped to allow access to the ultimate unknowing that lies at the heart of our encounter with the divine:

Whatever one may think of the value of communal celebration with all kinds of song and self-expression—and these certainly have their place—the kind of prayer we here speak of as properly ‘monastic’ (though it may also fit into the life of any lay person who is attracted to it) is a prayer of silence, simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity, a deep personal integration in an attentive watchful listening of ‘the heart’...a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence.

(Merton 1996: 5)

Just as Stein had found a way of connecting the medieval tradition to the contemporary through her phenomenological studies, so Merton equally found the key synthesis in these last decades between the medieval traditions and Zen Buddhism. For Merton, Zen-practice, the awareness of Zen-mind, and the practice of *satori* all shape his later articulation of what mystical prayer means to the late twentieth-century practitioner.

In particular he learns the importance of stressing non-thought, seeing, and experience with *satori* if realization is to happen:

Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception* by verbal formulas—or by emotional excitement. (Merton 1968: 38)

Thus Zen provided a means for Merton whereby he could articulate ‘a breakthrough, an explosive liberation from one-dimensional conformism, a recovery of unity which is not the suppression of opposites but a simplicity beyond opposites’ (Merton 1968: 140). A breakthrough, or revolution, not just for the practitioner but to the whole of a culture dominated by the dead-ends of objectification and reification:

The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as object, because it is not a ‘thing’. (Merton 2003: 7)

In his talks with the novices of Gethsemani, even before *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was written, Merton talks of the importance of ‘clarity’ in prayer. In these final writings Merton presents us with a contemporary version of ‘mystical prayer’ but one not concentrating on the hierarchical search for truth but rather the simple clarity of awareness. He warns that ‘the great danger to prayer is learning how to act in a spiritual way. The thing that holds us down in prayer is that we want to act in a way which we are accustomed to that is not necessarily God’s way’ (Merton c.1962). Too much reflection on prayer, or worse, trying to force our thoughts along in a certain prescribed ‘spiritual way’ will lead us away from the goal that we seek. As he describes it in one of his last lectures on Sufism:

We tend to think that [the spiritual life] works like this: We do something very generous then you get a flood of consolation and you press the right button every Monday morning and then you swim through the week on a tide of consolation and start again at the next weekend. (Merton c.1962)

On the contrary, as he bluntly puts it, the spiritual life is going well ‘when a person realises what a mess he is in’ (Merton c.1962), when the intellect and heart have dried and the thought of God’s consolation seems furthest removed. For, after weeks, months, years of this:

All of a sudden, at the right moment the thing comes in a flash—and you see the whole thing and find you’ve covered a great deal of ground without realising it. You suddenly come out in a whole new place. It’s what they call a breakthrough. And what you do is you breakthrough into a deeper level of yourself. What you find is a deeper truth that’s really in you—and it’s not yours, it’s God’s. (Merton c.1962)

CONCLUSION

Merton's 'Zen-Catholicism' reveals that the 2,000-year-old history of mystical prayer retains a vitality and adaptability that suggests it will continue to grow and evolve as a vital part of Christian life. Like Edith Stein, St Teresa (and ultimately St Augustine), Merton had articulated the need for the Christian soul to gaze in contemplation at the unknown source of All in prayer. As we have seen in this chapter this essential truth of Christian prayer continues to be articulated using the tropes and thought-constructs of succeeding generations whether they be Platonic, phenomenological, or Zen. The secret of the enduring presence of the Christian tradition of mystical prayer seems to lie in its hybrid nature. As we have seen, early Christians, working within the Platonic milieu, developed the tools and tropes to describe the process of prayer as they understood it from their encounter with Christ. Augustine took the important step of relating that Platonic milieu to the essentially Trinitarian nature of Christian prayer whilst also mapping the ecstatic states that are a concomitant part of that prayer. The mystical element of prayer was thus forged, enabling writers as diverse as Teresa of Avila, Edith Stein, Thomas Merton, and others to articulate their relationship with God through prayer, in its Trinitarian structure and also apophatic nature. Forged in the cooling embers of the late classical world, the essential adaptability of Christian mystical prayer makes it the ideal vehicle for later adaptations to other cultures and other times. We can tentatively conclude that this journey of adaptation and change will continue.

SUGGESTED READING

Armstrong (1967), Finley (1978), Herbstrith (1992), McGinn (2010), Merton (1996), Stein (1950), Tyler (2016).

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CHAPTER 11

LIVES AND VISIONS

PATRICIA ZIMMERMAN BECKMAN

CHRISTIAN history abounds with vivid encounters between God and humans. Mystical practitioners and their admirers have laced their accounts with dramatic and intense visionary moments where God appears, interacts, and often commissions a Christian soul to carry the news of intense communion to others. These encounters are made possible by a profound optimism that the Creator God of the universe desires to be in communion with creatures, that something about human nature either allows for cooperative connection (in a high theological anthropology) or can be overcome or cloaked by God's mercy (in a low one). Lives can offer a model to emulate or an exceptional seer to revere, but those which contain mystical elements such as visions always also offer the possibility of deep connections with the outpouring deity. Here is where many of the interpretive issues concerning Visions and Lives lie.

Mystical texts in the genres of Lives and Visions invite their audiences into lives saturated with holy encounters. They seek to produce in their audience a communion and transformation. The authors/subjects serve as exemplars, though the primary archetype for union is said to be not the author/subject but the incarnate Word Christ himself. They offer not just narrative but rich rhetorical and theological strategies upon which practitioners may draw, or more accurately, with which they may interact. The texts are catalysts for enriched Christian practice and understanding. Through encounter with these texts, the mystical works promise, readers can find their way to God.

‘TRUTH AS AN END POINT’

Energy-inducing writing is not limited to one period of Christian history. Rather, the breadth of techniques and strategies spans all eras. This chapter investigates materials with an eye towards explicit, representative contributions of mystical writing on the continued quest for relationship with the divine. Beyond the historical depiction of this wealth of mystical visionary and (auto)biographical strategies, this chapter also

seeks to expound their participatory possibility. That is, to explain how authors wove into their masterful texts an invitation that extends to twenty-first-century theologians and practitioners. A careful reading, combined with an awareness of how the texts' truths may present differently in today's world, can show the distinctive ways that their insights are designed to apply to lives of ongoing Christian mystical encounter. By looking at a range of texts issuing from ancient biblical lands, medieval European countries, and contemporary North America, we can see how they are theologically intricate in creative and daring ways. These texts are not merely description, but invitation and initiation.

As Bernard McGinn reminds us, the role of vision and the lives containing them is not an uncontested one in the realm of Christian theology (McGinn 2007). True literary geniuses such as Dante and Mechthild of Magdeburg attest to the fascination with creative visionary materials in Christian mystical traditions. Other anti-visionary mystics of the later Middle Ages into the early modern period contest such vivid, detailed visionary accounts, from the twelfth century onwards. The history in its foundations includes ancient Hebrew Bible meditations on Moses, first-century New Testament encounters in the Pauline corpus, and Augustine's profound engagement with the visions of Moses and Paul, as well as the pseudo-Dionysian approach to visionary access to God and participation in God (such as in theophanies). Contemporary secularized and nature mysticisms often rely on that history even while rejecting or setting aside parts of it. Authors of both *Visions* and *Lives* aspire to attain new visions within lives of personal transformation.

Readers today can often be distracted by questions of authenticity in an entirely different manner from those of earlier, especially pre-modern, readers. Factual or historical truth claims tend to dominate the task of constructing biographies and memoirs today. Accusations of invention demand a lengthy recanting. Earlier periods of writing about lives worthy of exploration and imitation, however, understood that the sculpting of identity was part of a recognized literary genre; and the resulting insights were understood as explicitly theological. The role of memory was central, as Augustine, for instance, indicated in book 10 of his *Confessions*. Memory extended beyond recalling the details of a life to plumbing the point of connection with God in humanity as created in the image of God. For many mystics, memory was the connection between the human and the triune God. The memory of radical interconnection fuelled the possibility for reconnection and restoration of the dynamic relationship between divine and human. Creative visualizations or speculations serve to retrieve the memory of interaction and shared connections between Creator and creature with profound theological consequences. The question of the biological location of memory in a material mind was of marginal importance, though some mystics undoubtedly located it there. More significantly, the events detailed were understood to access a deeper, relational identity of creature with Creator which could guide the reader into that same relationship. The *Life* or the *Vision* becomes less a rehearsing of one individual's quest than an invitation to participate in a similar transition, with a clear indication and explanation of how that is theologically possible.

Christians from earlier times would be shocked at the positivism of modern quests to unearth the actual reality as a solitary event. Barbara Newman reminds us of the difficulties of modern attempts to use these sources as solely historical records, 'as if any departure from raw fact would render the work inauthentic', pointing instead to the artful use of memory work and the contemplative life as means of engaging in mystical texts (Newman 1985: 10). Newman suggests that by looking at how Julian of Norwich reworked her visions repeatedly, for instance, we can participate in Julian's own process. In this way we experiment with how elaborate visualizations give access to the transformative encounter with the God the mystics say provided them. 'If we genuinely want to understand the complexity of our lives, or a fortiori of divine revelation, truth is an endpoint—not a point of departure. We must work our way toward it, not back to it, and that is why the first, breathless narrative must be rewritten, time and again, as it inches asymptotically toward its goal' (Newman 1985: 10). Twenty-first-century readers become participants in earlier mystical theologies not so much stemming from pre-conceived truth claims as from leaning into their radical dependence and trust in the transformative action of divine grace.

Exploring the role of devotional imagery among medieval German mystics, art historian Jeffery Hamburger reminds us of the essential role of art in the wildly imagistic visionary experiences of the sisters he studies. 'Before visions are dismissed as paramystical hallucinations, disqualified from serious consideration by their independence on corporeal imagery, it should be recalled that, even if not always to be accepted at face value, the visionary accounts are nonetheless a vital record of their authors' and audiences' spiritual aspirations' (Hamburger 1998: 115). Like Newman, Hamburger calls us to take the categories of the seekers, rather than start from a cold, falsely clinical approach that speaks more of our arrogance than the sources' limitations. An honest historical empathy helps us to understand what these texts try to do. Texts should not be read against the grain, for instance by looking for evidence of psycho-somatic trauma or delusions. The imagery serves a deliberate end, and often begins from biblical motifs. Whether a suckling lamb morphing into Christ at the breast of the contemplative, an illuminated Virgin Mary whose organs gleam and offer the child as eucharistic gift, a beloved apostle resting tenderly on his Savior's breast, or a bridal nuptial between soul and God, these accounts of visions amidst the lives of mystics show the essential role visions play in 'spiritual aspirations'. The question is how they construe a life of utter connection to the divine. Hamburger reminds us that devotional imagery and the developing practice that surrounded it contributed greatly to the theological instruction of a broad swath of religious and lay Christians in the High Middle Ages. It included a 'deliberate and calculated use of art within a devotional setting to foster visionary experience' (Hamburger 1998: 125).

How a richly visual culture operates is not entirely alien to us today. Mystical literature, like visual art, seeks to produce a profound mystical experience in the audience. Such texts arouse the reader into a relationship with the God and saints that they encounter. Like medieval practices of reading and biblical exegesis which employed multiple levels of meaning, moving beyond the literal or historical to the supreme level

of the anagogic (which drove one to connect with the divine), these Lives and Visions offered rich opportunities for creative exploration. They promised a fruit of divine connection, possible not despite their form, but *because* of it.

If recent scholarship on mysticism has moved away from the modern tendency to focus on veracity and representation in ways foreign to the mystical texts under examination, what can we find within the texts themselves? We must understand identity and consciousness not only in the historical period of the texts, but also in the effects of the texts themselves. Materialist and perennialist interpretations must give way to transformative and performative readings. The journey into divine encounter is mapped *by* the texts themselves.

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTIONS

Visionary accounts from within mystical Lives are themselves, then, full of rich theological negotiation. They are both the way into that meaning and its performance. Far from uniform, they nevertheless begin from a range of common questions. Even while offering answers limited by the worldview of their historical periods, the questions remain vital. Can we experience God directly? Does this occur in this life or only the next: is a partial, impoverished vision the best we can seek while waiting for a face to face vision in the heavenly realm? How does one discern the source and avoid self- or diabolical delusions? What are the categories of evaluation? What is meant by 'vision' in relation to the other senses, for instance of taste or smell? Does seeing surpass knowing, or is it a kind of knowing? Does the incarnation change the possibility for vision of God, now that an embodied deity has been seen and touched? Mystical texts not only seek to answer these kinds of questions, but offer methods with which to do so.

Having established how to read with the grain of these texts, we can still ask whether these are trustworthy and 'true' Lives and Visions and what criteria we would use to discern that. They may connect their narrative form to a theological understanding of memory, as the location for the image of God in humans, for instance, which distinguishes them from modern autobiography and biography, so that while we cannot ask of them precisely what happened historically, we can ask how the subject connects to the Creator. The voice, while particular to the subject, is quite often an everyperson, a typical soul, a mystic, a soul 'on' God. We can readily acknowledge the constructed nature of such life stories because we know there has been a selection of which episodes to include. Gender, religious status, language, and social location all play a role in the construction. Common tropes and techniques emerge. We come to recognize similarities or repeated formulae, often unique to the text. It is often in the interplay of standard tropes and particular stories that the creative energy emerges. Therein also lies the point of access for readers today, in exploring how such combinations generate new meanings and integrate them with previous texts. In this chapter, in several case studies, I will track just such effects, emphasizing not so much what the mystic sees or experiences as what

the descriptions themselves reveal about the nature and purpose of such experience in relation to God.

Further, theological assumptions affect how we recognize these texts. Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christians, for instance, often have different approaches and conclusions as to how the human and divine may connect. Theosis or divinization is a central aspiration in Orthodox worship and teaching (though also not absent from Western texts). Ascetics, theology, and practice merge to form a positive and enticing possibility for sustained, ongoing visionary lives of direct encounter with God. Roman Catholic sacramental life and theology centre on a piety of lived encounter or at least the possibility of it. Resources of past figures and communities from the ancient and medieval periods are significant parts of this mystical tradition. Mysticism can be especially fraught for some denominations within Protestantism. Within groups that stress the radical depravity of human nature after the Fall there is a suspicion that humans could not cooperate with God's grace even in revelatory encounters. For Martin Luther, for instance, humans are able to be cloaked by Christ's nature but not to know it inwardly, which severely limits what can be claimed about becoming God with God, if not ruling it out entirely. If magisterial Protestants have often been sceptical of claims of theosis, the radical reformers who spring from those traditions have not been. Quakers attuned to the Inner Light, for example, map readily onto medieval notions of illumination. We can recognize valuable insights in all of these denominational approaches, but only a careful appreciation of their different presuppositions and emphases makes for a nuanced reading. Knowledge of such differences expands our insights into the range of ways that Lives and Visions perform theologically.

SCRIPTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Lives are modelled on earlier lives, going back to the scriptural ancestral narratives, prophetic power, Jesus stories, and apostolic accounts. When the medieval scholar Bonaventure receives a vision of the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, he parallels his account to Francis of Assisi's receiving the stigmata, which itself recalls the wounds of Christ himself (Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*; Boehner 1956). The Gospels themselves are Lives, of course. In their multiform presentation they ask us to consider multiple constructions of what is essential about Jesus. Handed a multivalent canon and history of experiences, Christians are offered ways to integrate their own experience of God's presence. How they engage with that experience and how they apply it to mundane life is, equally, central to mystical Lives and Visions.

Navigating the often bewildering testimony of scripture on visions initiates Christians into how to grapple with visionary authority. In the Hebrew scriptures, an early ancestor Jacob wrestles with God and is astonished that, despite the overwhelming power of that face to face vision, he lives, albeit wounded in the hip from the encounter (Gen. 32: 22–32). During the Israelite journey to freedom, Moses who earlier had been afraid to

look at God (Exod. 3: 6) for terror of the annihilating effect, later amidst the great exodus speaks with God 'face to face' in his tent (Exod. 33: 11) and boldly asks 'Show me your glory, I pray' (Exod. 33: 18). But then the Lord warns, previous specialized intimacy aside, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exod. 33: 20). Which is it? Can we stand face to face and look upon the divine or not? The prophets have direct visions related closely to their teaching. Isaiah with his magnificent vision of the sapphire throne of God is initiated into his visionary activity despite his unclean lips. He declares that his eyes have seen the Lord of hosts and that vision propels him into his prophetic authority (Isa. 6). The prophet Ezekiel's wild, allegorical visions begin simply on the bank of the river where he proclaims 'I saw visions of God' (Ezek. 1: 1). These holy visions propel him into a throne-chariot vision which will form the template for many subsequent mystical vision quests. Jewish and Christian mystics have for centuries modelled their visions after the aesthetic, symbolic, and theological teachings of the visionary prophet. Special selection from the divine, imparted through awesome and often life-threatening vision, is the basis for divine-human connection.

The New Testament takes up this ambivalent possibility with Paul's promise that we will see clearly in a coming age (1 Cor. 13: 12), Paul's own vision of the third heaven where he heard things that cannot be uttered (2 Cor. 12: 1-4), and the author of John's Gospel insisting that no one has ever seen God except as the Son has made him known (John 1: 1). The Gospel of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount includes Jesus' words, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matt. 5: 8), yet the Gospel of Luke's Sermon on the Plain promises no such vision. In the great final vision given to John of Patmos, God reveals through an intermediary the ultimate plan and destiny for all creation. Announced by a sound like a trumpet, the visionary whirls about to face lampstands, a dazzling Son of Man, and finds himself so stricken that he 'fell at his feet as though dead' (Rev. 1: 17).

Scripture provides these and other examples to show the possibility of vision of God, even while exercising caution over who receives it and how it is given. Not everyone receives such a vision. God unfurls the nature of the universe through selected seers. Using these scriptural witnesses, we can see subsequent Christian authorities wrestling with the role of direct vision in the divine-human relationship.

In conversation with ideas of contemplation in Greek philosophy and marrying them to those of scripture, the early African bishop Augustine of Hippo develops a lasting set of questions for examining the role of visions. He regards the classic scriptural passages as a mixed legacy on the question of immediate vision of God. Creation imposes a limitation on what humanity can see of the invisible God. The theory of vision in this period was of a ray emitted from the human eye that would touch the object seen and the object would then imprint itself on the human eye. He struggles with whether divine nature is beyond that and whether any manner of clean heart could facilitate a vision of God, despite Christ's promise in Matthew's gospel (Matt. 5: 8). There is nothing about the divine or the human essence that interrupts unmediated vision. Yet since we are not yet living in the eternal time of the divine, we must await a future, reconciled life for the fullness of the beatific vision. If we could live in the eternal present

we would have constant inundation with divine light, but we are limited by time. Later mystics will consider visionary encounters as breaches of human time, Meister Eckhart famously offers an 'Eternal Now' as contact zone, a way (or state) of time to step outside normal human dimensions. In this way, they acknowledge with Augustine that our limited nature prevents full vision, while also joining Augustine in allowing for God to breach that limitation, without opposing the creature's capacity.

With his predecessor the Apostle Paul, Augustine hopes for a final vision where true contemplation and exchange can occur. His entire tract on the possibility of seeing God ends with the pronouncement that such vision is not possible, given that God's nature is fully beyond comprehension. Yet, in common with bishop Ambrose's example of reading beyond the physical or literal meaning of scripture, he thinks that there is a way in which God can be seen. In his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Chapter 12, he distinguishes three types of visions which allow him to expand the category of vision beyond the physical. His three categories of corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual vision define a way of seeing that extends beyond physical bodies (corporeal) and the images of physical bodies in the mind (spiritual), to a sense of presence or intuition in the mind of what is unseen (intellectual), which provoked a rich legacy of interpretations of vision in Christian mysticism. This would pave the way for a rich medieval visionary culture in which a mystical visionary would be incorporated into great Lives, integrating the metaphorical (which Augustine by no means reduces to a category of false or untrue) with the concrete physical plane.

The great medieval Dominican Thomas Aquinas strives to systematize the inheritance of scripture, early church authors, and Greek philosophy on this question (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 92; 1964–81: xiii). He struggles to integrate a Dionysian reluctance to positively affirm or behold God's essence, advocating darkness or invisibility, with scriptural optimism about intelligibility through sight. He carefully distinguishes God from God's effects in an ultimate vision. That is, the actual being of God from the manifestations or outpourings of that God. He notes Augustine says it is impossible to see God's essence. But Thomas insists that we will be transformed at a future redemptive time, which will allow us to see God, not because God's essence has changed, but because our capacity has. We can look to the promises of saints in heaven after resurrection for such reassurance, he comforts. Thus, mystical authors understand the rupture in ways of knowing that happen in their encounters with God to be outside a normal mode of knowing in their own time. Though certainly mystics vary on how out of the ordinary this knowing is, some find it a recurring possibility not far from the realm of concentrated mindfulness. Like Augustine, Thomas distinguishes more heartily between vision of God and the physical vision humans experience in regular life. The particularity of this seeing is echoed in many mystic writings. For example the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen says, 'But the visions I saw I did not perceive in dreams, or in sleep, or delirium, or by the eyes of the body, or by the ears of the outer self, or in hidden places; but I received them while awake and seeing with a pure mind and the eyes and ears of the inner self, in open places, as God willed it' (Hildegard, *Scivias*, declaration; Hart 1990: 60). In this way early and medieval church writers wrestled with

the special mode of knowing that is vision. They received a sometimes ambiguous tradition which sought to reconcile God's ultimate distinction from humans with the possibility of direct vision, and the integration of such vision in human life.

MYSTICAL STRATEGIES: THREE EXAMPLES

If the truths of mystical Lives and Visions lie in both content and form, we can now turn to the strategies used by particular mystics to grapple with an elusive God, examining three examples which show the kind of theological and literary negotiations that are typical. Though the range of mystical writing and strategies is vast, it is only by choosing some particular examples that the distinctive form of these texts becomes evident. We must ask not just *what* they see, but *how* they see, and *how* that sight communicates specific insights on God. All attest that Vision is no incidental category, yet nor is it uncontested in its authority. Precise means are used to illuminate how the divine breaks into the human world. Through a dazzling range of images and methods, these Visions and Lives seek to nurture readers into a practical theological process. The figures here are chosen with an eye to diversity of historical period and effects. They are disproportionately female: contrary to some scholarship, the view is not that women were by nature more visionary. The reasons why many women were visionaries lies in other factors, such as their need to authorize their teaching, amidst church institutional restrictions (see Coakley 2006, Hollywood 2016, Bynum 1992, Fraeters 2012, McGinn 1998). Another chapter could be written on completely different or solely male figures. And indeed, new chapters could be written which examine the connection between Visions and gender relations as they change through history.

In the three examples chosen here, Hildegard of Bingen reveals how visions can become a source demanding quasi-scriptural exegesis, interpretation, and participation; Mechthild of Magdeburg develops the narrative 'I' of self-reflection into an original theological anthropology; and Annie Dillard imbues formal literary creativity with the parallel process to God's generative energy. Other strategies missing from this selection would include extreme apophaticism (or negative naming), hyperbolic kataphasis (or overtly exuberant naming), imagistic scriptural meditation, and extended itineraries, among others. The brief excursions here at least show how to examine these texts at the level of both form and content, examining how their techniques work.

Vision and Exegesis: Hildegard of Bingen

The Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen's frequent visionary activity marked her as Sybil of the Rhine and preaching prophet within her own lifetime. Her *Scivias* or *Know the Way* recounts twenty-six descriptive visionary accounts alongside Hildegard's own exegesis of them. She moves from a concrete, thematically closed visionary encounter to

an invitational pull of more expansive, recurrent possibility for all. Her work can help us see why the mystical events she interprets are not limited to any specific episode in historical time but are representative of a frequent and repeatable activity. She teaches about the cosmos, the Fall of humans, the nature of the Church, how Wisdom communicates to people, the sacraments, and all manner of theological topics. They reveal a universe pulsing with revelation. The reader learns first by being confronted with bold multifaceted images, then through Hildegard's exegesis. Hildegard moves from a concrete, thematically closed visionary encounter to a wider invitation to her audience. Her visions, in other words, seek not simply to describe but to induce revelatory experience in her readers.

In her opening declaration, Hildegard lays out her understanding of the source and import of her visions. 'But I sensed in myself wonderfully the power and mystery of secret and admirable visions from my childhood—that is, from the age of five—up to that time, as I do now' (Hildegard, *Scivias*, declaration; Hart 1990: 59–60). She is careful to distinguish these visions from dreams. These aspects of her life are not her subjective experience, she cautions us (a mistake modern interpreters often make); rather, they teach how God reveals Godself in the world (Newman 1985: 168). They are didactic. And they come from God: 'And I spoke and *wrote these things not by the invention of my heart* or that of any other person, but as by the secret mysteries of God I heard and received them from heavenly places' (Hildegard, *Scivias*, declaration; Hart 1990: 61). Her theology insists that humans can receive such vision from God, and she even claims a kind of inerrancy in vision. While employing humility formulae she also draws on biblical prophetic and warrior authority, of such biblical figures as Deborah, Huldah, and Jael, to justify her case for women's speaking and teaching, otherwise prohibited. The 'Living Light' proclaimed itself to her, insisting that despite her fragility as the weak sex she would be a conduit for direct revelation. In fact, her lowly form, she says, is an asset because it proves the source must be God. She heard a direct command to write what she has seen and explicate it for her audience, presumably the sisters in her convent in addition to the broad circuit of churches in which she secured clerical authorization to preach.

The reader seated before the colourful but often abstract imagery of Hildegard's *Scivias*, which include visual illuminations created under her leadership, must work to identify the teaching. Only with Hildegard's own commentary can we understand the full consequences of the enlarged star, the lily-sniffing alabaster man, the interpenetrating circles, or the earth clod. As 'tender and fragile rib imbued with a mystical breath' Hildegard first narrates a formal description of what she sees, without theological commentary, paired with the striking illuminated image produced in her convent. Her commentary follows.

During visions, Hildegard says that she is often 'stopped by a secret seal'. Hildegard notes that God alone provides when God wills and warns 'you must not search into the secrets of God beyond those things the Divine Majesty wills to be revealed' (Hildegard, *Scivias* 2.1; Hart 1990: 154). Only with demonstrable faith can she be granted more of the vision. Not everyone, she suggests through such caveats, can access this kind of direct

imagery. Hildegard's work is less experiential or focused on personal experience than many other medieval female mystics (Newman 1985: 168). While navigating her authority to teach carefully, she sees herself as a theological teacher, and her writing is replete with learned references to scripture, Church Fathers, medical treatises, and music theory. She insists the divine in the form of the 'Inner Light' makes this type of instruction possible. She is bold enough to speak as one 'taught inwardly by mystical inspiration', even as the Light chastises 'because of Eve's transgression you are trodden on by the masculine sex, speak of that fiery work this sure vision has shown you' (Hildegard, *Scivias* 2.1; Hart 1990: 150). The visions serve as invitation to contemplate and even experience the incarnation. 'But let the one who sees with watchful eyes and hears with attentive ears welcome with a kiss My mystical words, which proceed from Me Who am life' (Hildegard, *Scivias* 2.1; Hart 1990: 157). Illumination, then, works on the reader through her manuscript.

Hildegard lives in an integrated world where winds, herbs, celestial music all reveal an incarnational God. Her own visions further explicate divine essence and seek to communicate God's energy in all parts of the material cosmos. The visions serve as a handbook of God's illuminating power throughout all creation, Hildegard suggests. Choirs of angels (Hildegard, *Scivias* 1.6), the Church as Bride (Hildegard, *Scivias* 2.3), and the history of salvation as an edifice (Hildegard, *Scivias* 3.2) all cohere. The reader is asked to unpack the significance of each visual element. What is that fiery, wavy set of concentric circles at the head of the vision impregnating the lower six-sphered orb? Who are the strangely luminous figures and why are they surrounded by stars of different sizes? Hildegard explains, no longer in terms of personal illumination, that this is a universal disclosure of God's action in the world in an integration of multiple sources of revelation, including the light and dark of creation, the Hebrew Bible's prophets, and the New Testament seer, all amalgamated in the vision. She adds her distinctive voice in calling, for instance, for the 'greenness' of God infusing all. Indeed, her repeated use of 'greenness' both in explicit theological treatises and in her music form a characteristic of her integrated theology. A living, thriving life surges through the cosmos and through her as she teaches. Her integrative theological system of a cosmos swirling with power in ether, winds, colour, and written word emerges beautifully in the confined/constrained illustration. Here is a mini panel to teach a maxi theology. She lures her readers to a vision from God who could presumably self-reveal in any format but reveals to Hildegard in a complex set of nested imagery. Engaging her visionary works allows today's readers to integrate the natural world, the human as image of God, and a fierce non-anthropomorphized God of Light.

Tracking the Self: Mechthild of Magdeburg's Pilgrim Soul

In her episodic, poetic narratives, the thirteenth-century German-speaking lay woman beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg teaches her theological anthropology through story with special regard to basis and potential for human-divine relations. Mystical texts

often move from the narrative first person into third and second. She commissions the recurring patterns within the narrative I/subject/self to teach about the nature of God and humans. Far from a grammatical accident, she employs them to invite readers to become the subject of the text, and to be transformed according to the shifting narrative voice. The narrative does not describe a pre-existing experience, a kind of souvenir account of a pilgrimage gone by, but shifts the perspective in relation to the reader who is invited to follow. Mechthild of Magdeburg used such techniques to produce desire, expectation, and finally union with God in her readers. She may then pull back right at the moment of union to invite a deeper encounter. In essence, she asks her reader: try this.

We need not overwork questions of whether this was the historical person Mechthild's own experience or whether it was 'true' in the sense of an actual event lived in time. If truth is in the writing, an end point of literary creativity, we can understand that a Life that contains a Vision may have less to do with the empirical questions than with Mechthild's own teaching priorities. She works to produce longing and a movement to the brink of sensuality, in a journey of desire understood as part of her larger teaching about how the Word recurrently becomes flesh.

Mechthild of Magdeburg writes a series of vignettes in her multi-genre work (Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*; Tobin 1997). Both visionary account and life, the seven books in her Middle German vernacular explore the journey of a beloved bride/soul who encounters her God and holy ones in a mixture of prose and poetry. There are love scenes, miraculous eucharistic feasts with the saints, special advocacy sessions with the Virgin Mary, purgatorial journeys, and heavenly visits.

In one episode the reader meets a soul invited to union with her beloved (Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1.44; Tobin 1997: 58–62). Tracing the narrative protagonist throughout this scene reveals the intricate work of theological anthropology that occurs here. The soul is made from identical material as the God she seeks. That facilitates union. Their mutual desire enables the soul to transcend all intermediaries, including church authorities and beneficial virtues, in order to experience a complete merger. At precisely the moment of mutual desire, the narrator separates from the I and spans broadly into the third person, inviting the reader to participate.

The scene begins with a dialogue in which the Holy Spirit instructs the Soul on her path to genuine love. The direct, mutual form of address reinforces that mystical inspiration does not need intermediaries but comes directly from within the Godhead. "Ah, loving Soul, do you wish to know what your path shall be?" "Yes, dear Holy Spirit, instruct me." The reader becomes increasingly invested in the development of the soul. Mechthild dresses a fairly esoteric concept of Divine Love as the messenger of love (Minne) familiar from medieval Germanic romance. 'She', the third person soul, gets ready to meet her Lover by robing herself in all the virtues: a 'white dress of chastity', 'cloak of her good name . . . gilded with all the virtues'. She enters a nightingale-filled forest, a trope in medieval romances for an impending sexual union. 'She' is eager and sends her church-sanctioned messengers (prophets' longing, chastity of Mary, virtues of Christ) to entice her beloved. This journey is recognizably a mystical one, embedded

in church teaching on the nature of love and access to the divine. With the help and preparation of the virtues, the dance begins and the seduced lover presents himself for a more intimate dialogue.

This lover is Christ, met in the language of mutual love. She must follow her Lord to 'leap into love, from love into knowledge, and from knowledge into enjoyment, and from enjoyment beyond all human sensations.' This increasing intensity echoes the degrees of love and progression to love represented, for example, in Richard of St Victor's *Four Degrees of Violent Charity* or Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. When lord addresses lady in second person we understand that direct illumination from Christ makes this dialogue possible. 'You shall have your way with the Son of the virgin . . . Come at noontime to the shade of the spring, into the bed of love. There in the coolness you shall refresh yourself with him.' Troubadours sing to the great and often unrequited sexual love between lord and lady; the beguine theologian here sings to the Christological possibility of a requited union.

What could be a scandalously bold claim about human capacity to unite with Christ through love, Mechthild clarifies through careful narrative voice shifts. The lady, mitigating her boldness, asks 'Oh Lord, that is too much that she be your partner in love who has no love in her, unless she is moved by you.' Shift back to the third person allows the narrator to serve as commentator. Examine this claim, the voice suggests. Survey the soul. It also provides the distance which allows Christ to pronounce the status of the soul. The soul's own power and the author's constructive licence give way to the authority and initiative of Christ.

The senses are an important player in the drama. Mechthild has the soul instruct the senses, 'Leave me; I must go and refresh myself.' The soul can and must move beyond them. This dialogue between the soul and the senses parallels the move to a deeper union, beyond the mediated holiness of the 'chastity of virgins', 'blood of martyrs', 'counsel of confessors', 'wisdom of apostles', 'John the Baptist's austere holy life', or even 'the small Child in the lap of the eternal virgin'. She must have the direct union of mature lovers: 'That is child's love, that one suckle and rock a baby. I am a full-grown bride. I want to go to my Lover.'

The soul can overpower her senses, but the senses in turn warn her that she will be blinded and perhaps even annihilated by the Godhead if she continues. But Mechthild teaches us her theological anthropology in an amorous speech where she insists, far from, or perhaps despite, destruction, the naturally embedded nature of God and soul demands mutuality.

A fish in water does not drown.
A bird in the air does not plummet.
Gold in fire does not perish.
Rather, it gets its purity and its radiant color there.
God has created all creatures to live according to their nature.
How, then, am I to resist my nature?
I must go from all things to God,

Who is my Father by nature,
 My Brother by his humanity,
 My Bridegroom by love,
 And I his bride from all eternity.

(Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1.
 44; Tobin 1997: 62)

Boldly first person, this narrative I is now identifying like substance in herself and her God. This 'I' calls to others, how can we resist our nature to immerse ourselves naturally within the Godhead?

Mechthild further underscores this self-understanding by the shift to dialogue that occurs in the 'secret chamber of the invisible Godhead' next to the lovebed.

'What do you bid me, Lord'
 'Take off your clothes.'
 'Lord, what will happen to me then?'
 'Lady Soul, you are so utterly formed to my nature that not
 the slightest thing can be between you and me...'

(Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1.44;
 Tobin 1997: 62)

Undaunted by senses, still balking at the unmediated union, the soul takes direct instruction from the Lord. The scene unfolds with the Lord speaking from within the Godhead; soul now recognizes her/our true nature in relation to the self-revealing God.

Lord, now I am a naked soul and you in yourself are a well-adorned God
 Then a blessed stillness
 That both desire comes over them.
 He surrenders himself to her,
 And she surrenders herself to him.
 What happens to her then—she knows—
 And that is fine with me.
 But this cannot last long.
 When two lovers meet secretly,
 They must often part from one another inseparably.

(Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1.44;
 Tobin 1997: 62)

Precisely at this moment of most intimate encounter in the lovebed, as the reader anticipates the love scene which will inevitably follow—if it is to mirror all other romances in the genre—Mechthild pulls the reader back into third-person narrative. We peer in, but don't fully experience. The reader can fill in the details, of course, but the author Mechthild denies readers the full, internal affect of the union. By this technique, she signals to the reader that we watch from afar until the journey becomes our

own. We're removed into a detached separation, raising our desire for more, wanting our own encounter.

The itinerary clearly laid out, Mechthild then employs direct address to invite the reader to her own sacred tryst: 'Dear friend of God, I have written for you this path of love. May God infuse it into your heart! Amen' (Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1.44; Tobin 1997: 62). She has made clear our own distance and proximity to Divine Love. Follow this dance, she suggests, and you will meet your own Lover in the shadow of the lovebed, generated by your own inner nature. You, too, will be transformed into this world of infused love.

Generative Poetry and Prose: Exploring the Absurd and the Beautiful

In her renowned work *Pilgrim and Tinker Creek*, North American author Annie Dillard maps the transcendent and immanent conflation in the terrain of her own 'anchor-hold' as she wrestles with the 'uncertainty of vision' (Dillard 1999: 5). She conceptualizes the sublime in ways both similar and distinct from the Christian traditions she invokes, often adding a deep observation and promise of natural world mysticism. She trusts in a firm holy possibility that enlivens her short stories and narratives. With the artful eye of a seeker, she tells of her own life of pilgrimage to find an aching world of beauty where wood duck, Polyphemus moth, snakeskin, water, muskrats, locusts, and human all intersect in holy transformation. She has a particular technique of producing revelation through startling vision. While different in tone and vocabulary from medieval mystical writings, her work nonetheless links visionary insight to the transformation of experience as a whole, like those earlier sources.

The reader could be forgiven for assuming Dillard is diarist, recording in Darwinian precision the length of pond worms and breeding habits of muskrats, but she is fundamentally concerned with tracking a divine presence. Her effusive, often chaotic prose reflects the chaos of divine creativity, while seeking its meaning. 'Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see' (Dillard 1999: 275). Visions and encounters abound. She hunts her hidden God, who cannot be trapped but emerges when least expected. 'It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem' (Dillard 1999: 9). She invites her readers to join her. She's been 'thinking about seeing' she says (Dillard 1999: 17).

The universe grants her visions, she admits, but few have the courage to endure it. 'The secret of seeing, is, then, the pearl of great price... The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise' (Dillard 1999: 35). To view is not necessarily to know. 'For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by

meaning' (Dillard 1999: 28). Through her dense descriptions of colour and locusts who harass her at her window, she tries to pull back the veil on 'another kind of seeing that involves letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied' (Dillard 1999: 33). What she offers is not just visions, but a visionary method. Stalking fish and muskrats, she walks the holy path of creek bank, waiting to be 'knocked breathless by a powerful glance' (Dillard 1999: 35). Her fish is not just a fish, for Christ as ichthys offers a glimpse of the coincidence of a symbolic world turned incarnational. 'The more I glimpse the fish in Tinker Creek, the more satisfying the coincidence becomes, the richer the symbol, not only for Christ but for the spirit as well' (Dillard 1999: 186).

Her book is an itinerary, like so many earlier mystical writings. She weaves into the prose some of the force that inspired it. She is travel guide, guru, and confessor all at once, revealing the creative, generative process she sees as Godself. 'I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself... I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood' (Dillard 1999: 14–15). Fish as Christ and the physics of the creek as 'Principle of Indeterminacy' roil over one another to produce a bountiful, teeming creature, rich with the creative principle that is readily accessible to one ready to handle the vision. She overlays desert hermit teaching with tree growth. 'And there beside the forest path I saw, it occurs to me now, Abba Moses, in the form of an acorn... The acorn itself was loose, but the root was fixed: I thought if I could lift the acorn and stand, I would have the world' (Dillard 1999: 262). The reader becomes an observer, an itinerant, and a holy postulant. This layering technique reflects a multivalent universe that has been there all along, now opened to our observation. It will send us alternatively into rapturous absurdity (in her 'Expedition to the Pole', Dillard 1982) or quiet contemplation ('Living Like Weasels', Dillard 1982). From observation we move to a greater, more direct and participated illumination.

Dillard, like Mechthild, plays with the narrative 'I' to effect this participation. Within a forty-minute muskrat stalking, the narrative 'I' is put into question, affecting her consciousness. The muskrat may not have known she stalked him. 'I never knew I was there, either... My own self-awareness had disappeared... I have done this sort of thing so often that I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now' (Dillard 1999: 200). Here again we find a mystical author employing a fluid narrative I and sense of self to explain how the person attains another form of knowing. Where Mechthild stalked the Beloved, Dillard hunts a broader life force of the universe. What she calls elsewhere the 'pole of relative inaccessibility', she articulates in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in terms of physics and natural wonder. 'I find in quantum mechanics a world symbolically similar to my world at the creek' (Dillard 1999: 204). Both the natural world and the broader cosmos prove awesome and indeterminate. 'The electron is a muskrat; it cannot be perfectly stalked' (Dillard 1999: 205). This is a twentieth-century vocabulary for an apophatism that escapes arrogant positivism, replacing it with the humility of exploration. 'Rather, we know now for sure that there is no knowing' (Dillard 1999: 205). Dillard here is a mystical practitioner inviting us into a place where technique and goal merge. She calls us to emulate her method. We need to 'stalk everything' and frantically see Moses collide with physics submerged

in a creek, through attentiveness. 'Heisenberg himself says, "method and object can no longer be separated." . . . These physicists are once again mystics gazing transfixed into an abyss of freedom' (Dillard 1999: 206). In this mish-mash of physics and immersion in nature, Dillard takes the part of fellow pilgrim. She suggests a practice of observation and epistemological humility that will have us questioning our very categories for exploring and describing the universe. There must be an unsaying, a 'reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off' (Dillard 1999: 255), which moves between absurdity, worship, and ultimate meaning.

In the oddly fragmented essay 'An Expedition to the Pole' (Dillard 1982), Dillard works with characteristic literary technique to move her readers to the sublime, which she designates as 'The Pole of Relative Inaccessibility' or 'The Land'. She interweaves contemporary North American church experience with nineteenth-century Arctic exploration accounts in order to point out the strange similarities of formality, bewildering danger, and absurdity in both types of quests. By her juxtaposition of these different kinds of attentiveness, she questions our categories of knowing. She does so not to disparage either. She regards the element of the absurd, for instance, as serving the vital movement of knowing beyond the familiar. Her mode of enquiry is less philosophical than literary, using interwoven storylines and fantastical images, in the larger theological context of the postulant's prayer. The final arrival is not static or readily imaginable, but still powerful and absurd, mirroring the nature of true divine presence.

She explains the divine in terms abstract, personal, and communal. Her theological anthropology reflects these features. 'There is not such thing as a solitary polar explorer, fine as the conception is' (Dillard 1982: 27). At the base of this journey, Dillard tells us, is a marriage of technology, land, and people, entailing new possibilities of connection.

Dillard has a strong authorial voice dedicated to unpacking the experience of the religious seeker. She speaks autobiographically about her own upbringing as a contributive factor in her experience of worship. She overcame a 'fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing' to arrive at this sacramental, ritualized worship service. The details of her Life are vital to what the Vision means that she is about to present. She also discusses actual explorers, using their 'Lives'. But she deliberately blurs the boundaries of biography and fiction, so that we begin to lose our optimism at discerning any stable, essentialized truth, in favour of a performative disillusion of clear edges of meaning. In that disillusion, however, we have the opportunity to go beyond mere feeling or impression, to a new intersection of worlds, where we will meet the Energy that is both beyond knowing and precisely known.

As she merges the narratives of church services and polar expedition, she takes us on this journey, at first teaching us how to move with increasing ease from one to the other. Then, approximately halfway into the essay, when in the mass a congregation of seekers invoke the Holy of Holies, Dillard inseparably connects the Arctic journey with church, in their shared goal. After the ancient Sanctus, she insists, one 'loses oneself at sea' (Dillard 1982: 32). When the ludicrous contemporary musicians apply their slapstick to the holy intonation, she identifies a move as desperately misguided as those northern explorers hauling what they considered valuable across the pack ice

while freezing to death. What baggage do we carry, she thereby asks. This is confession, and tender absolution all at once. She empathizes with humankind's quest. 'I would rather, I think, undergo the famous dark night of the soul than encounter in church the dread hootenanny—but these purely personal preferences are of no account, and maladaptive to boot' (Dillard 1982: 33). Her inventory for church offering is the ship's log list. She interweaves Plotinus, the narrative I, and Sir John Franklin, who all seek a flight to the Alone or backgammon. Absurd suggestions expose human aspirations at the very edge of our understanding. Instead of a systematic treatise on the unknowability of God or the limitations to human reason, her *Via Negativa* uses a narrative technology that keeps us on the edge of narrative discourse. It produces disjunctures in plot and coherence that drive the reader to new awareness.

In the last portion of the essay, no longer separated by sections with subheadings, what seemed two separate narrative threads intermix within paragraphs and sometimes sentences. They meld. At the end, Christ is posing for photos with dear penguins and babies and farm wives. Tambourines jingle. What could all this bizarre riotous imagery convey about the nature of the Ultimate and our place before it? Why precisely everything, Dillard pronounces 'singing at the top of her lungs'. With rhetorical question as incantation she identifies with both sets of the lost—the explorers at sea and the contemporary church musicians. She draws both, and us, into her hopeful prayer 'But how can any of us tone it down? For we are nearing the Pole' (Dillard 1982: 52). That pole is precisely where, she hopes, her prose has taken us.

CONCLUDING INVITATION

With these few examples from within a vast and vivid tradition of mystical encounters, we are presented not with mere reports of historical visions and events, but with invitations to a participatory engagement of our own as readers, assuming that we begin by sharing the desire for a similar intimacy with God's presence. Traditional and imaginative elements are interwoven. A history of literary, theological, and intellectual elements intertwine. The emphasis remains, however, on the present unfolding, the invitation, and the personal movement. The content of *Visions and Lives* necessarily remains utterly bound up with this attention to form. Whether through analysing visionary and aesthetic experiences like Hildegard, toying with the construction of self in rhetorical play like Mechthild, or adamantly insisting on the new absurd way of knowing induced by divine-human connection like Dillard, the invitation is to 'take up and read', and to find in these lives and teachings a rich vision for mindful, direct encounter.

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CHAPTER 12

MYSTICAL TEXTS

ROB FAESEN

TRANSLATED BY JOHN ARBLASTER

THE study of mysticism and mystical theology implies the study of texts, and the general principles of scientific literary analysis are applied here. Indeed, literary theorists in the various fields apply these methods, for example, when the works of John of the Cross are studied in the context of the ‘canon’ of Spanish literature, or Hadewijch in the context of Dutch literature.

Nevertheless, mystical literature contains a number of elements that are worthy of specific enquiry; these are the subjects of the present chapter. The first is that as a linguistic form, these texts have a unique ‘referent’—i.e. that the connection between the *signifiant* and the *signifié*, to use the terminology of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, is exceptional. Second, it is important to note that mystical literature consists of a wide variety of literary *genres*, which is partly related to the mystical authors’ motives for writing, the concrete circumstances in which these texts were written, and the intended readers. Third, these texts often function(ed) in difficult (historical and theological) *contexts*, which is a determining factor in terms of intertextuality and reception history.

AN EXCEPTIONAL CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SIGNIFIANT AND THE SIGNIFIÉ

A discussion of the specificity of mystical texts requires some delineation of the adjective ‘mystical’. There are dozens of possible approaches to this problem, as is evident from many of the other chapters in this book. In order to avoid unnecessary complication in this chapter, I will not discuss the ‘broad’ conceptions of this word, but rather adhere to the more limited conception that is formulated concisely by Max Huot de Longchamp in his article ‘Mysticism’ in the *Encyclopaedia of Christian Theology*:

The word 'mysticism' has lost all precision since Rousseau and the Romantics applied it to any irrational experiences, especially those attributed to religious phenomena. We will restrict it here to its most classic Christian meaning of a perception of God, so to speak, experimental (*pour ainsi dire expérimentale*), a genuine celebration of the soul at the inner coming of Christ . . . What is involved then is a very particular coming to consciousness (*une prise de conscience toute particulière*) of the mystery of Christ, and it was to evoke this that the word entered the Christian vocabulary with Clement of Alexandria (160–220). Mysticism is knowledge of the mystery, that is, knowledge that goes beyond the letter of the Scripture and the signs of the liturgy to the very reality designated by both, and that is hidden in God.

(Huot de Longchamp 2005: 1082; the French in parentheses is from the original article: Huot de Longchamp 1998: 774–5)

To clarify this *prise de conscience*, Max Huot de Longchamp alludes to a well-known passage from one of Tauler's sermons (which may contain an allusion to Hadewijch's *Sixth Letter*, Van Mierlo 1947: 68–9):

The greatest and truest feast is the ultimate feast, the feast of eternal life, that is, the eternal bliss of God's complete presence. That is impossible now, and the feast that we may enjoy here below is only a foretaste of that feast, namely a feeling—an inner, joyous feeling—of God's presence in the spirit.

(Sermon 12 for the Monday before Palm Sunday, *Tempus meum nondum advenit, tempus autem vestrum semper est paratum*, Vetter 1910: 57)

Ruusbroec provides a further, more detailed analysis in his *Spiritual Espousals*:

The unity of our spirit behaves in two manners, namely, essentially and actively. You should know that the spirit, according to its essential being, receives the coming of Christ in its bare nature, without intermediary and without cease. For the essence and the life which we are in God, in our eternal image, and which we have and are in ourselves according to our essential being, are without intermediary and inseparable. And therefore the spirit, according to its innermost, sublime part, receives without cease the impress of its eternal image and of the divine brightness in its bare nature, and it is an eternal abode of God, which God possesses with eternal indwelling, and which he always visits with new comings and with new inshining of the brightness of his eternal birth.

(*Espousals*, b1626–b1637, Alaerts 1988: 471–3)

This immediacy of the contact between God and the human person—of which the particular mystic becomes conscious—has repeatedly caused contention and misunderstanding (cf., for a twentieth-century reformulation de la Taille 1928a, 1928b). On the other hand, it is precisely this immediacy that places the authors in question in a particular linguistic situation, compelling them to perform a particular type of 'theo-logy'. Indeed, this dimension entails that the authors often seek to emphasize that

their words refer to a fundamentally ineffable reality (i.e. the *signifié*), and that their articulations of it are consequently deficient. Ruusbroec expresses this as follows:

At times a person may be drawn above himself and above the spirit (but not altogether outside of himself) into an incomprehensible good that he can never verbalize or express according to the mode in which he heard or saw it; for in this simple act and in this simple sight, hearing and seeing are one.

(*Espousals*, b558–b563, Alaerts 1988: 349)

The reason for this ineffability is thus that mystical consciousness implies direct contact with God, who is one and eternal, above time in an eternal 'present' (some mystical authors, e.g. Eckhart and Ruusbroec, occasionally refer to the eternal 'now'), but on the other hand, that language necessarily unfolds in temporal succession. John of the Cross raises this point explicitly in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.14.10–11, where he discusses the aspect of timelessness:

When this Divine light strikes the soul with less force, it neither perceives darkness nor observes light, nor apprehends aught that it knows, from whatever source; hence at times the soul remains as it were in a great forgetfulness, so that it knows not where it has been or what it has done, nor is it aware of the passage of time. Wherefore it may happen, and it does happen, that many hours are spent in this forgetfulness, and, when the soul returns to itself, it believes that less than a moment has passed, or no time at all. The cause of this forgetfulness is the purity and simplicity of this knowledge which occupies the soul and simplifies, purifies and cleanses it from all apprehensions and forms of the senses and of the memory, through which it acted when it was conscious of time. This prayer, therefore, seems to the soul extremely brief, although, as we say, it may last for a long period; for the soul has been united in pure intelligence, which belongs not to time; and it is the brief prayer, which is said to pierce the heavens, because it is brief and because it belongs not to time. (Peers 1943: i. 123–4)

And in 2.26.3 he sketches the implications of this for linguistic, and by extension literary, expression:

Here it is to be observed that this kind of knowledge is distinguishable according to two divisions: the one kind comes to the soul with respect to the Creator; the other with respect to creatures, as we have said. And, although both kinds are very delectable to the soul, yet the delight caused in it by the kind that relates to God is comparable to nothing whatsoever, and there are no words or terms wherein it can be described. This kind of knowledge is of God Himself, and the delight is in God Himself, whereof David says: there is naught soever like to Him. For this kind of knowledge comes to the soul in direct relation to God... Inasmuch as this is pure contemplation, the soul clearly sees that there is no way wherein it can say aught concerning it, save to speak, in certain general terms, of the abundance of delight and blessing which it has felt, and this expressed by souls that experience

it; but not to the end that what the soul has experienced and perceived may be wholly apprehended. (Peers 1943: i. 194–5)

John of the Cross also explicitly refers to the poetic character of these texts, in the prologue to his *Spiritual Canticle*:

Who can write down that what He [the Spirit of the Lord] reveals to loving souls wherein He dwells? And who can set down in words that which He makes them to feel? Who can express that which He makes them to desire? Of a surety, none; nay, indeed, not the very souls whom He passes. And it is for this reason that, by means of figures, comparisons, and similitudes, they allow something of that which they feel to overflow and utter secret mysteries from the abundance of the Spirit, rather than explain these things rationally. (Peers 1943: ii. 24)

This explains why so many mystical authors use such striking neologisms—e.g. the terms *istigkeit*, *overformen*, or *gegoodde nature* in Eckhart and Ruusbroec—as well as their poetic or metaphoric formulations. It is important to note in this regard that these poetic expressions are not merely rhetorical embellishments of ‘abstract’ mystical-theological doctrine. The text’s literary form is fundamentally inseparable from its content (cf. Mommaers 2004). It is no coincidence that so many readers throughout the ages have been struck by the beauty of mystical texts, and that these texts have been studied for their literary qualities.

LINGUISTIC FUNCTIONS

The prominent Russian-American linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) distinguished six functions of language (Jakobson 1960), and it is evident from a study of the corpus of what we now call ‘mystical texts’ that they contain each of these functions. This, incidentally, is probably not the case for what we might call ‘academic’ disputational theology.

- (1) All mystical texts are obviously *referential* to the extent that they convey information.
- (2) The *poetic* function is often present in mystical texts. This is not only true of texts that written explicitly as poems, but also for many prose texts. For example, many of the Sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux contain poetic expressions—such as the famous *Jesus mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde jubilus* (Jesus to me is honey in the mouth, music in the ear, a song in the heart) (Leclercq et al. 1956: 86)—which highlights the beauty of language as language.
- (3) The *emotive* function of language appears from the moment that the author expresses his or her personal experience or emotions. In medieval mystical texts, however, such as Hadewijch’s poems, the ‘I’ does *not* coincide with the historical

author. Indeed, this is almost never the case in medieval texts. Consequently, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which this emotive function actually corresponds to the author's emotion; this becomes much easier for texts written in later periods.

- (4) The *conative* function, which is intended to inspire the reader or hearer, is evidently most strongly present in letters and sermons that aim to incite a reaction from the reader or hearer. These texts' particular objective is to impress the encounter with God upon their readers to the greatest extent possible, for example by describing the structure of this encounter, by clarifying its various movements, and by resolving possible intellectual obstacles, etc. It is remarkable that even the most methodically meditative texts emphasize that contemplative (mystical) contact with God is not achieved by human effort. An example of this is the magnificent *Rosetum exercitorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum* by the Windesheim canon Jan Mombaer—the most influential author of the Modern Devotion after Thomas à Kempis—which presents an extreme systematization of prayer life, but which at the same time radically relativizes it (Mauburnus 1510: tit. XX, alph. XLVI, z; cf. also *annotatio sexta*, tit. XX, alph. XLVI, u).
- (5) The *phatic* function of language concerns the use of language that is not primarily intended to convey content, but merely to maintain or develop social contacts. Examples of this use of language—which is relatively rare in mystical literature—include the fortieth chapter of the *Épithalame* by Jean de Saint-Samson (see the comment in the modern French translation, Perrin 1997: 21) or Hadewijch's *Letter* 28.
- (6) Finally, the *metalingual* function of language may be found in a remarkable number of mystical texts, namely when the author refers to the limitations of language in relation to mystical experience itself.

The aspect of 'ineffability' clarifies the frequent use of negations in mystical texts. These negations often do not only relate to rational concepts, but also to poetic imagery and comparisons. In his considerations on the specificity and distinctiveness of mystical theology, Jean Gerson assigns a crucial role to this ineffability and the corresponding use of negations. Indeed, the use of negations (like the use of poetic expression) does not spring from a lack of knowledge, but from the enlightening, overflowing origin of knowledge in the mystical theologian.

Mystical theology begins in the doctrine gathered from the internalized experiences lived in the hearts of devout souls, just as the other half of theology [the 'symbolic' theology and the 'proper' theology] proceeds from those matters that operate extrinsically. All the learned are in agreement that mystical theology proceeds through denial, so that 'God is not a lion, an ox, a stone,' etc. (Consid. 2, 1). Interior operations... cannot be described with clarity or conveyed in writing in the manner in which they are felt (Consid. 6, 1). (Gerson, tr. McGuire 1998: 266–70)

Pseudo-Dionysius provides a similar perspective concerning the use of negations:

We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden. (Pseudo-Dionysius, tr. Luibheid 1987: 138)

The translator of this passage interestingly notes: “Clearing aside” here translates a term (*aphaeresis*) that is otherwise rendered “denial”. The latter indeed refers to the use of negations.

Thus, in addition to theology that ‘ascends’ to God through rational inquiry, there is also a form of insight that finds its origin in the initiative of the Other. It is this insight that seeks linguistic expression in mystical texts. In other words, there is a distinction between receptivity on the one hand, in which knowledge is received, and composite expressions of that knowledge on the other hand.

LITERARY GENRES

Genres and their ‘Separation’ from Mystical Experience itself

The corpus of Christian mystical literature contains various genres. These may be divided into four broad categories, depending on the distance of the text from mystical experience itself (Deblaere 1979).

The closest genre to personal experience is the spiritual diary. These texts are written primarily for the authors themselves, and document insights or experiences that are not intended to be shared with others but are recorded merely for their personal importance. One particularly well-known example of the spiritual diary is the so-called *Mémorial* by Blaise Pascal, in which he noted down an event that occurred on 23 November 1654, between approximately 10.30 p.m. and 12.30 a.m. It was an intense experience of God that he renders with the exclamation ‘Fire!’ (*Feu!*)—which may refer to the burning fire of God’s love (cf. Exod. 3: 2) or to the order to shoot a weapon. The text reads as a faltering sequence of words and scriptural quotations, suggesting that the intensity of the experience was still so palpable that it was impossible for Pascal to note it down in a calm and structured manner. On the other hand, for him personally noting down these words was apparently sufficient to record the event; a more structured exposition was unnecessary. Indeed, it was not Pascal’s intention for others to read this text: he had it sewn into the seam of his coat and it was only discovered coincidentally after his death. The *Markings* by Dag Hammarskjöld (*Vägmärken*, translated into English by his friend W. H. Auden) are a similar case. This book also consists primarily of diary fragments that were not intended for publication. They are also often enigmatic to the reader. When authors decide to publish their diaries themselves,

however, they generally make a selection of the passages which, for whatever reason, are deemed most relevant. For example, the diaries published by Julien Green contain a number of descriptions of mystical events in the author's life.

The spiritual biography is a related genre in which the mystical author records the development of his or her spiritual life for one or more confidant(e)s. Well-known examples of this genre are the *Vida* by Teresa of Avila and the *Relation de 1645* by Marie de l'Incarnation. It is important to bear in mind that these texts were written at the explicit request of other people, and that the texts were not written for public circulation. Teresa of Avila wrote her biography because she was instructed to do so by her confessors, and she indicates that she would have preferred to leave the mystical aspect of her life concealed (cf. *Vida*, ch. 11). The *Relation* of Marie de l'Incarnation was written after repeated requests from her son, Dom Claude Martin, and she understood that he had a right to know why his mother had abandoned him to become an Ursuline when he was still so young. In terms of genre, the *Visions* of Hadewijch are a related text. She mentions that she wrote down her experiences at the request of one (unnamed) person with whom she corresponded (Van Mierlo 1924: 164, also 54).

The *raparium* and the *proposita* are also personal texts (i.e. not intended for publication) and which, when published, shed light on the mystical life of the author. These literary forms were often written during the *Devotio Moderna*. Two fine examples of the latter are the profound *Soliloquium* and *Breviloquium* by Gerlach Peters.

A second general group of genres consists of letters, expositions, and sermons for limited audiences. In these literary forms, the author addresses others, but in a very personal sense. These texts are intended as spiritual guidance in which the author does not so much convey his or her own personal (mystical) relationship with God, but attempts to offer structure and insight for the spiritual lives of other people—e.g. when Bernard of Clairvaux comments on the Song of Songs as the abbot and spiritual father of his community. Generally speaking, however, these texts were later circulated more widely. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the intended readers on the one hand and the actual (much larger) circle of readers on the other. The situation is sometimes even more complex, such as in the case of Julian of Norwich: she wrote her visions for a small circle, but explicitly states that she would wish the insights revealed to her (i.e. not the visions themselves) to be known to all Christians. This important genre will be discussed more extensively in this chapter, given the number of mystical texts written in this literary form.

Third, there are also texts which offer more general, structured expositions on mystical experience or on the theological insights required to understand mystical life. These texts are often not only intended for mystical or contemplative readers, but for a broader audience. There are numerous examples of such texts: the *Institutio Spiritualis* by Ludovicus Blosius, the *Spiritual Espousals* and *Spiritual Tabernacle* by John of Ruusbroec, the *Breve compendio* by Achille Gagliardi, the *Catechisme spirituel* by Jean-Joseph Surin, the *Life of Moses* by Gregory of Nyssa, etc. In fact, many patristic and medieval theological treatises contain these elements, and it is consequently very difficult to 'categorize' these texts as specifically mystical. Contemplative union with God is

simply an integrated element of these spiritual-theological expositions. It is important to note that this is certainly not true of all the theological works of the patristic period, but it is often difficult to make a clear distinction.

The second and third aforementioned types of mystical texts are often of greater literary quality. These include examples such as the poems of Hadewijch and John of the Cross, the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, etc. Descriptive and poetic forms commonly occur, though there are also examples of dialogical-dramatic texts, such as the *Miroir* by Porete, in which *amour* and *raison*, in addition to many other figures, engage in dialogue with each other. Sermons, such as those by Eckhart, or letters, such as those by Hadewijch, are often of an inciting nature.

A fourth genre is that of expositions about or descriptions of mystical figures. The large collection of medieval *vitae* is probably the best known example. Although these texts are accessible and narrative in nature, this is a relatively difficult genre for mystical theology, for two reasons. The first is that these texts are not written by the mystical figures in question, and it is thus inevitable that the authors run the risk of misinterpreting (either consciously or unconsciously) the meaning of what they describe. Second, the specifically hagiographical nature—and thus edification-oriented—intention of these texts influences the way in which they treat the mystical dimension of the lives they describe. An interesting example is the *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth, which contains paraphrases of her own mystical texts. One of her texts is extant in its original form, namely the *Seven Manners of Love*. A comparison of the Middle Dutch original and the (anonymous) Latin paraphrase in the *vita* reveals that the latter mitigates the specifically mystical character of the former. The reason is quite clear: the *vita* was written to edify and inspire imitation among a broad readership (in this case, all the houses of the Cistercian order, and even further afield) as the author indicates (*Vita Beatricis* 3.275, Reybens 1963: 185–6), while the original text was intended for a small circle of mystical readers, since Beatrice wrote in the vernacular rather than in Latin. Nevertheless, such *vitae* do occasionally contain remarkable mystical-theological elements. For example, the *Vita Benedicti* by Gregory the Great contains a description with commentary of a mystical event in Benedict's life (de Vogüé 1979: 236–42), which was later echoed in the sermons of Eckhart, the poems of Pseudo-Hadewijch, the *Institutiones Taulerianae*, and other works. Another example is the oldest vision cycle written in the Low Countries, which contains radical Trinitarian theology that is typical for the region: the *vita* of the Merovingian Aldegondis of Maubeuge (630–84), a Carolingian text that was inspired by earlier Merovingian sources (cf. Opgenhaffen 2013).

All these genres developed in particular historical contexts. The analysis of personal experience and psychological states clearly increases in the mystical literature of the early modern period; such descriptions are relatively rare in patristic and medieval literature, though they are by no means entirely absent.

One characteristic that all of these genres have in common, however, is that in the thirteenth century, texts in the vernacular begin to appear, first in the Low Countries (the *Seven Manners of Love* by Beatrice of Nazareth, the (anonymous) *Limburg Sermons* and the oeuvre of Hadewijch), and shortly thereafter across the rest of Europe. Why

this occurred is not entirely clear, but one obvious explanation is that these texts were not intended for wide circulation.

Origins and Audiences

It is clear that mystical texts have very different origins and intended audiences. Generally speaking, this is not true of academic theology. There is, however, very little explicit information in mystical texts themselves as to why the texts were written and for which audience(s) they were intended. It is nonetheless important to bear this diversity in mind when attempting adequately to appreciate the theological ‘generalizability’ of mystical texts.

In the prologue to his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross provides some concrete indications. He states that he has a very specific group of readers in mind, consisting of a number of mystical confreres:

Nor is my principal intent to address all, but rather certain persons of our sacred Order of Mount Carmel of the primitive observance, both friars and nuns—since they have desired me to do so—to whom God is granting the favour of setting them on the road to this Mount; who, as they are already detached from the temporal things of this world, will better understand the instruction concerning detachment of spirit. (Peers 1943: i. 15)

His reason for responding to their request and writing the book was that the mystical dimension was present in these people’s lives, but that they found it confusing and desired direction:

To this end [to expound and describe this dark night] I have been moved, not by any possibility that I see in myself of accomplishing so arduous a task, but by the confidence which I have in the Lord that He will help me to say something to relieve the great necessity which is experienced by many souls, who, when they set out upon the road of virtue, and Our Lord desires to bring them into this dark night that they may pass through it to Divine union, make no progress. At times this is because they have no desire to enter it or to allow themselves to be led into it; at other times, because they understand not themselves and lack competent and alert directors who will guide them to the summit. (Peers 1943: i. 12)

Not only could nobody direct and advise them, but the help offered was often based on inadequate presuppositions:

For some confessors and spiritual fathers, having no light and experience concerning these roads, are wont to hinder and harm such souls rather than to help them on the road; they are like the builders of Babel, who, when told to furnish suitable material, gave and applied other very different material, because they understood not the language, and thus nothing was done. (Peers 1943: i. 13)

These brief indications provide some important clues as to why mystical texts—especially of the second and third type—were written, namely that mystical life is itself rather unusual. This is especially true in a context in which the general intellectual and religious tendencies presuppose that such contact with God is impossible, or that it is easily misunderstood. Teresa of Avila attests to this in her *Vida*. In the extended excursus on the various forms of prayer (chapters 11–18), she refers to her own difficulty in understanding what had happened to her in the most intimate contact with God that she had experienced—and thus a fortiori the difficulty she had in explaining it to her confessor:

There was one thing of which at first I was ignorant: I did not know that God was in all things, and, when He seemed to me to be so very present, I thought it impossible. I could not cease believing that He was there, for it seemed almost certain that I had been conscious of His very presence. Unlearned persons would tell me that He was there only by grace; but I could not believe that, for, as I say, He seemed to me to be really present; so I continued to be greatly distressed. From this doubt, I was freed by a very learned man of the Order of the glorious saint Dominic: He told me that He was indeed present and described how He communicated Himself to us, which brought me very great comfort. (Peers 1960: 180)

In periods when the human subject was conceived as autonomous—and ‘distanced’ from God—the sudden consciousness of an immediate contact with God was apparently very disconcerting. The reasons for writing mystical texts and their intended audiences may thus be various, but they are often related to the unusual, new, and alarming nature of God’s presence. This may relate to the personal experience of the author or that of the addressee, but it may also be related to the cultural and theological environment. Let us examine the various reasons for writing mystical texts and their respective addressees.

As already mentioned, ‘diary’ entries were written by the authors themselves for their own use and with the intention to gain insight and order in their experience through the act of writing, i.e. the act of verbalizing itself. There are a few rare examples of texts that testify that this occurred in dialogue. For example, the anonymous *Brevis commentatio* on the Song of Songs, which in 1667 was attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux by Jean Mabillon, appears rather to have been a written summary of the conversations about the Song of Songs between Bernard of Clairvaux and his friend William of St Thierry. These conversations would also result in the paradigmatic, ‘moral’ interpretations of the Song in Bernard’s *Sermons* and William’s *Commentary*.

In periods or context in which the mystical dimension as such was not problematic, mystical texts were sometimes written to correct potentially problematic spiritual attitudes. One example is a striking theme in Hadewijch’s *Letters* and *Poems in Stanzas*. She urges her readers not to remain in a certain religious or mystical condition (i.e. ecstatic experience) but to be prepared to abandon themselves completely to attain completely union with God. This appears to imply that there was a tendency in Hadewijch’s circle to perceive of mystical experience as a goal in itself, and to be content therewith.

Ruusbroec's severe repudiation of the attitudes of the movement of the Free Spirit are in the same vein. These texts were not intended to defend the possibility of union with God, but rather to correct misconceptions about this union.

Texts of the third genre were intended to assist others in their intellectual and religious search for God. Regarding these cases, it is important to take the specific religious-intellectual context into account. Indeed, it appears that in these contexts, there were certain religious or intellectual presuppositions that precluded the possibility of direct contact with God. In these cases, the author functions as a spiritual leader who offers his/her readers necessary (intellectual) 'tools'.

A good example is John of Ruusbroec's *Sparkling Stone*. He explicitly states that his intention is to assist mystical readers to understand their experiences:

Look, in each one of all these likenesses I show his own being and his own practice to a contemplative man. But no one else will be able to understand this, since no one can teach others the contemplative life. (Noë 1991: 112–13)

The concrete historical circumstances in which Ruusbroec wrote this work shed a revealing light on his stated intention. The book was written in approximately 1343, shortly after the promulgation of the papal bull *In agro Dominico* (1329) by Pope John XXII, which condemned a number of statements in the work of Meister Eckhart. A number of these statements concern the (mystical) experience of union with the Son in his relationship to the Father. The bull notes that this need not necessarily be problematic and can be understood in an orthodox manner, on the condition that it is explained better and more extensively. The central concern of the *Sparkling Stone* is 'how we can become hidden sons of God and possess the contemplative life'. In other words, Ruusbroec explained this specifically mystical theme in an intellectual context in which it was not clear, and in which mystical expositions such as Eckhart's had been misunderstood.

The theme of the misunderstanding of mystical treatises became increasingly common in texts from later periods. For example, in the seventeenth century, Jean-Joseph Surin wrote a number of strong statements in this regard:

A number of profound authors have written on this matter.... The four principal representatives are Tauler, Ruusbroec, Herp and Suso... They have wrongly been dismissed (*blâmés*) by a number of scholastic doctors, who on the basis of their learning assumed they had the right to judge such authors. They condemned them because they did not understand them... Is it possible that a scholastic doctor, though well-grounded and competent in the science he practices, is yet incapable of understanding what a mystical doctor says? Yes, this is certainly possible, if he is no more than a scholastic doctor. (*Guide spirituel* 4.3; de Certeau 1963: 178)

Incidentally, this same period saw the emergence of a new type of text, namely mystical lexica, which were intended to facilitate the reading of older mystical literature—which obviously implies that this literature had become increasingly inaccessible in a

changing intellectual context. One example is the *Pro theologia mystica clavis* by the Amsterdam Jesuit Maximilianus Sandaeus (Max Van der Sandt). In his dedication letter, he refers to the unusual terms and styles employed by mystical authors (from the perspective of his time):

The reason for this is not affectation, but the elevation and incomprehensibility of heavenly matters, the experience of which induces a condition of expressing ineffable things in another way of speaking. (Sandaeus 1640: 2)

And he continues:

It happens that love has its own way of speaking...within which the terms of love must be understood from the expressions and affections of the lovers.... Truly, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, you have concealed much from the wise and the prudent and revealed much to the little ones who seem to stammer when they speak of you and the hidden things of your wisdom—and are consequently misunderstood. And finally, the obscurity of the writings and sayings of the mystics results from the fact that they use expressions that are rarely used in the schools, or of which the meaning is extremely difficult when seen from outside... And thus it is that those who are not familiar with the mysteries or oppose them spread notions that mystical theology contains absurd, difficult, dangerous, and inappropriate ways of speaking to express orthodox doctrine. (Sandaeus 1640: 2–3)

INTERTEXTUALITY AND RECEPTION HISTORY

This brings us to two further aspects of the literary nature of the texts, namely their intertextuality and their occasionally complex reception history.

As already mentioned, many mystical texts are of a high literary quality, and their literary form is sometimes inspired by existing (secular) genres. Hadewijch's *Poems in Stanzas* are one fine example, since they were deeply influenced by the poetic conventions of the thirteenth-century secular love poetry of the troubadours and trouvères (Willaert 1984). Her poems (which were actually written as songs or hymns) are very refined poetic transformations of a particularly difficult poetic form, combined with numerous veiled Christological references, allusions to older biblical, liturgical, and spiritual literature, and musical elements. The intertextuality of these works is very sophisticated and complex.

One particularly important aspect of intertextuality concerns the relationship of mystical authors with the Bible. Just like many other Christian texts, mystical literature integrates extensive biblical quotations. These authors are often criticized for misusing the Bible through unjustifiable, free quotation. At a cursory glance, this does indeed appear to be the case. Indeed, this is precisely what the contemporary reader might

think, when e.g. paging through Ruusbroec's *Tabernacle* and reading that 'by the columns [of the court of the tabernacle] we understand strong desire for all the commandments of God' (2.73), or that 'by the spice tree called *calamus*, we understand the inward obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ' (5.1968–9). The contemporary reader, who is used to a univocal reading of the Bible, in line with the historical-critical method, will then easily be inclined to reject this as a merely arbitrary and thus subjective interpretation, which might just as well be replaced by an entirely different interpretation. Jerome's reflections on this point then appear to be particularly pressing: 'the duty of a commentator is not to expound on what he himself may desire, but rather on what [the author] he is interpreting thinks' (1910: 381). But upon closer inspection, it appears that the intrinsic connection between the Bible and Christian mystical literature is much closer. There is a reciprocity at play in which the Bible provides mystical authors with an interpretative key to understanding their initially perturbing consciousness of the presence of God. On the other hand, the experience understood from this perspective provides an interpretative key to understand the internal coherence of the Bible (interesting examples in Richard of St Victor's *Four Degrees of Violent Love*, Dumeige 1955).

The specific literary form of a mystical text is obviously determined by the intellectual formation of the author and his/her literary or artistic background. Incidentally, in contrast to the corpus of academic theological texts, there is no general rule as to the background or education of mystical authors. Some received prolonged literary or theological educations, such as, for example, William of St Thierry or John of the Cross, while others were completely untrained, such as the lay brothers Jan van Leeuwen and Laurent de la Résurrection, or Anna of St Bartholomew, who was taught to read and write by Teresa of Avila.

In some cases, the intellectual formation and cultural background of the author is unclear or even intentionally concealed. A famous example of the latter is John of Ruusbroec. We do not know where he received his theological education. After his death, Jean Gerson condemned the third book of his *Spiritual Espousals*. Consequently, the Priory of Groenendaal emphatically promoted the idea that Ruusbroec was an illiterate autodidact, of whom it was said—as it had also been said of Bernard—that he learned more from the trees in the forest than in the schools (extensive analysis by Ampe 1975). This defence was presumably intended to protect Ruusbroec's posthumous reputation from 'technical' (academic) theological objections. This approach did not convince Gerson, since Ruusbroec's works were obviously written by someone with sound theological formation. As a result of Groenendaal's campaign, however, we still do not know where Ruusbroec was educated; we do not even know where he was ordained.

This leads us to the issue of the reception history of mystical literature. Indeed, some mystical texts had great authority and were profoundly influential, while others remained unknown or were even forbidden. It is important to note that the authority of these texts is not necessarily related to the social or ecclesiastical position of their authors. Authors of mystical texts include men and women, priests and religious as well as lay people, the educated and the uneducated, those with ecclesiastical mandates and those without. Evidently, all these aspects influenced the literary form of the relevant

texts, but the inherent authority within the texts is usually an unrelated factor. The most striking example is perhaps the *Dialogue of Divine Providence* and the letters by Catherine of Siena.

Some mystical authors, such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Richard of St Victor were considered authoritative by 'academic' theologians and their works were consequently widely circulated and enjoyed a long, unproblematic reception history.

By contrast, there are numerous examples of texts that were negatively received and were prohibited, which evidently does not imply that they did not have a wide readership. Two of the most famous examples are Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart. Marguerite Porete's *Miroir* was condemned between 1300 and 1306 by the bishop of Cambrai and publicly burned in Valenciennes. She did not heed this condemnation, however, but rewrote the book and submitted it to three theologians for approval. Ultimately, however, a commission of theologians at the University of Paris condemned the book and its author. Despite the fact that Marguerite Porete was executed as a heretic, her book survived and was copied and spread across Europe, albeit anonymously. The Italian historian Romana Guarnieri identified Marguerite as the author of the book in 1946. It is striking, however, that not long before, in 1927, the English translation of the (then still anonymous) book had received an *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat*.

Still more remarkable is the fate of texts by Meister Eckhart. A theological commission at the papal court in Avignon discussed with Eckhart problematic sentences in his work (see the so-called *Votum theologorum Avenionensium*, Sturlese 2000). After the promulgation of the bull *In agro Dominico* in 1329 by Pope John XXII, the circulation of Eckhart's texts initially appears to have stopped. After a detour in Groenendaal, however—thanks to the integration of a number of important passages from Eckhart's work in *On the Twelve Virtues* by Godfried van Wevel—they found their way into the so-called *Institutiones taulerianae*. This is Laurentius Surius's Latin translation of a Middle High German compilation that was probably published by Peter Canisius: *Des erleuchten D. Johannis Tauleri, von eym waren Evangelischen leben, Göttliche Predig, Leren, Epistolen, Cantilenen, Prophetien*. The book later became extremely popular and was published in numerous editions and translations. As a result, readers up to the nineteenth century read important themes from Eckhart's work, without realizing that he was the original author (Gueullette 2012).

One of the central reasons that so many texts were forbidden lies in a misunderstanding of specific terms. Reading texts in differing intellectual contexts, in which these terms had different meanings, almost inevitably led to misunderstanding and condemnation. Gerson's aforementioned condemnation of the third part of Ruusbroec's *Spiritual Espousals* is an interesting example. Gerson interpreted the expressions in the book to mean that the mystic is ultimately absorbed into God and ceases to exist as such. It may be useful to quote Gerson's criticism, since his point appears to be that Ruusbroec is simply an imprecise writer:

The third part of that book [the *Espousals*] is to be absolutely rejected and wiped out. Either it is badly explained, or it is completely in contradiction with and differs

from the sound doctrine of the holy doctors, who have spoken about our beatitude. And it does not correspond to the definition as it is expressed in the decree which states that our beatitude consists in two acts, namely the vision and the fruition with the light of glory. And, if it is the case in the completed beatitude that God is not the essence of our vision and our clarity, but only the object of it, how much more will it be alien to some imperfect resemblance of the beatitude, of the kind that we may taste here on the way [our earthly life].

(*Epistola prima ad fratrem Batholomaeum*, Combes 1945)

The same difficulty had in fact arisen among the Carthusians at Herne when they read Ruusbroec's work, as noted by brother Gerard of Saintes, the procurator of the Charterhouse (Arblaster and Faesen 2014). The problem was not, however, that Ruusbroec was a confused author, for in fact he is remarkably consistent and clear, but lies rather in a misunderstanding of the expression 'without distinction' (*sonder onderscheet*). In a changing intellectual context, in which individuality became the basic category of personhood—an anthropological conception with which Ruusbroec fundamentally disagrees—union with God 'without distinction' could only be understood as ontological 'fusion'. The Herne manuscript, which contains Gerson's *Epistola prima ad fratrem Batholomaeum* (Brussels KB 4935-43, written in 1408–9, cf. Andriessen 1981: 311–14) contains the following gloss on the relevant passage:

The highest beatitude consists in vision and fruition. This beatitude is from Christ, the vision through Christ, and the fruition in Christ. In a certain sense, Paul was essentially perfected when Christ was his life, and he had no life: 'I do not live, Christ lives in me.' (Combes 1945: 618)

Whoever wrote this gloss was apparently very familiar with the issue. Indeed, the Pauline expression (Gal. 2: 20) used to explain the deepest human perfection makes clear that it is a matter not of ontological fusion with Christ, but of mutual indwelling each in the other.

Albert Deblaere has discussed a similar case, namely the problematic reception of the terms 'essential' (*weselijk*) and 'superessential' (*overweselijk*). In Brabantine mysticism, and especially in Ruusbroec, these terms have specific meanings, and they were circulated across Europe thanks to the works of Hendrik Herp:

As soon as these treatises were no longer read as descriptions of a spiritual state ... but as theological expositions (*uiteenzettingen*) or even as methodical prayer handbooks, and the relevant expressions were interpreted in the sense that they have in Thomistic philosophy, they were deemed suspicious and dangerous. In translations they were increasingly replaced by the terms 'excellent' (*éminent*) and 'most excellent' (*suréminent*)—as vague as could be. [From the end of the sixteenth century] these expressions caused confusion and were contested because they were thought to lead souls astray. They gradually disappeared over the course of the seventeenth century.

(Deblaere 1961: 1346)

This case thus also concerns a misunderstanding of an important term—‘essence’ (*wesen*) and the derived term ‘superessence’ (*overwesen*)—that led to a negative reception. Another famous example is the term *annihilatio* (cf. Sandaeus 1640: 102). The unfortunate conclusion reached was often that the mystical authors in question were bad, unclear, or confused writers.

The same issue was often at stake in the discussions between the theological commission at the papal court in Avignon and Meister Eckhart. The commission repeatedly noted that Eckhart’s statements might easily be misunderstood if taken literally (*verba sicut sonant*). Remarkably, Eckhart himself occasionally agreed (Sturlese 2000: 573).

In other words, there are often clear historical reasons why some texts were received positively while others were rejected. But there are also examples where these reasons are not so clear, such as the famous letter of 21 March 1575 from Everard Mercurian, General Superior of the Society of Jesus. Surprisingly, the occasion for this letter was the permission Pope Gregory XIII had granted to the Jesuits to read prohibited books. Instead of communicating this permission to the Society, Mercurian took the opportunity to promulgate his own ordinance on reading prohibited books, restricting the papal authorization (Leturia 1956: 365–7). Three types of books were only to be read by Jesuits after having received permission from the provincial superior: first, the works of Erasmus and Vives, second, obscene books, such as Catullus or Martialis, and third, spiritual books not in accord with the Society’s Institute. The third category contained explicit reference to the following authors: Tauler, Ruusbroec, Mombaer’s *Rosetum*, Hendrik Herp, the *Arte de servir a Dios* by Alonso de Madrid, Raymond Lull, Henry Suso, and the works of Gertrude of Hefta and Mechtild of Magdeburg. As Joseph de Guibert and, more recently, Manuel Ruiz Jurado have pointed out, this is a very strange list (de Guibert 1953: 208; Ruiz Jurado 2004: 413–14). It would have been understandable for Mercurian to include authors who were already suspect, such as Herp and Ruusbroec, but he did not explicitly mention authors such as Savonarola. On the other hand, the works of Suso, Gertrude, and Mechtild had never been considered suspect until the publication of this letter. The matter becomes even more puzzling when one considers the list of authors Mercurian explicitly recommended to novice masters in 1580, five years later. The second list includes figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St Victor, Catherine of Siena, Ludovicus Blosius, and Dionysius the Carthusian. In other words, it appears that the mystical dimension as such was not the problem.

Consequently, since the late Middle Ages, an extensive corpus of mystical-theological texts was barely received in academic theological circles, but many of these texts were culturally highly influential. John of Ruusbroec’s oeuvre again serves as a fine example. On the one hand, one might say that Ruusbroec’s work was almost entirely absent from the work of later theologians (Faesen 2010; Andriessen 2014)—this, of course, is related to the condemnation by Gerson—but on the other hand, his work was very influential on religious culture in the West. Indeed, Geert Grote and the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were directly influenced by the (mystical) ideal of the *common life* as articulated by Ruusbroec. The *devotio moderna*, with its immense impact on art and

culture, was closely connected to this movement. The widely read *Mirror of Perfection* by Hendrik Herp ('Ruusbroec's herald') contains a great deal of thematic and textual material from Ruusbroec, and the same may be said of the *Evangelical Pearl* and the *Institutiones Taulerianae*, which were also extremely popular.

There are a few examples of mystical authors who rewrote or revised their own works. In some cases, this was due to the first version being destroyed, as was the case for Marie de l'Incarnation, whose manuscript was lost in a fire, leading her to write a second version. Marguerite Porete appears to have redacted her book after its first condemnation by the Inquisition. Julian of Norwich wrote two versions of her *Revelations*, a longer and a shorter version. The reason for this is presumably that Julian herself wanted to write a longer version several years later. There are also rare examples of mystical works being redacted by others to 'correct' them. This was presumably the case for the *Cántico Espiritual* by John of the Cross, since there is a shorter ('Redaction A') and a longer ('Redaction B') version. The editions and translations of works by John of the Cross generally prefer the longer version because it is assumed that John of the Cross rewrote the text himself. An analysis of the content reveals, however, that the longer version mitigates the mystical content of the shorter version (Huot de Longchamp 1991, 1998). This makes the supposition that the work was 'corrected' by someone else more probable.

Finally, it is worth noting that the mystical texts researched nowadays do not necessarily correspond to the historical reception of these texts. For example, the works of Hadewijch have in recent years become the subject of intense research and publication, but were practically unknown in her own time. The fact that they are extant in only four manuscripts attests to this fact, and the Latin translation of her visions and letters (a copy of which was apparently owned by the Carthusians of Zelem, cf. Axters 1956: 209–10) has never been found, so it cannot have been widely circulated. By contrast, some authors were highly regarded in certain periods, but are now practically forgotten. Two examples from the Middle Dutch mystical tradition are Jan van Leeuwen (d. 1378) and Jan Pullen (1520–1608). The Groenendaal *opera omnia* manuscript of Jan van Leeuwen's works was made with care and rich decorations equal to the manuscript of Ruusbroec himself, indicating that Jan van Leeuwen was held in similar regard within the community. Unlike Ruusbroec's works, however, many of Jan van Leeuwen's books are not even published, let alone critically edited or translated. The oeuvre of Jan Pullen is even more remarkable. He was a well-known spiritual leader and a trained theologian who was also very familiar with the mystical tradition. He wrote an extensive mystical oeuvre. Of the seventy-three titles known to us, only four have been published.

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CHAPTER 13

MYSTICAL POETICS

ALEXANDER J. B. HAMPTON

THE very emergence of mysticism is bound up with poetry. Not the poetry of the mystics, but the poetry of the Bible and the *μυστήριον* (mystery or secret) considered to be contained therein. The first Christian mystics engaged in reflection upon scripture, and especially upon scriptural poetics. In confronting its figurative and lyrical language they developed an understanding of the poetic capacity of words to embody and express the mystical experience. The development of vernacular mysticism brought about the flourishing of mystical poetry, which applied the poetic capacity demonstrated in scripture to the recording of mystical experience in the form of personal narrative. It is not possible within the confines of this chapter to write a history of poetics and mysticism, however through the consideration of some of the tradition's consummate representative figures in the Latin West, one can observe how the specific interaction of poetic form and spiritual content allows the mystical writer to achieve a result for the reader otherwise not possible in discursive terms of communication. Before considering these historical examples, it is necessary to explore ideas of mysticism and poetry, in terms of their definitions, histories, and the rhythm that connects them, all of which contribute to our understanding of the descriptive capabilities of the poet mystic to re-present the mystical transformative experience. After demonstrating the integral role of poetry within the story of mysticism, this examination will close with a brief consideration of its recent history, and the future importance of poetics for the mystical endeavour.

THE RHYTHMIC PRECEDENT

The definition of mysticism persistently offers difficulties. As reflection upon mysticism has developed, attention has moved beyond the tendency to focus upon the moment of mystical ecstasy to include the process of preparing for and expressing the mystical experience (though the ecstatic moment and its recording need not be separate). Bernard McGinn's sustained reflection on the topic and his influential body of work has

proffered a well-regarded and oft-cited definition that takes this broader view into account. He writes, 'the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God' (McGinn 1991: p. xvii; Lamm 2013: 3–4). The definition expands the notion of mystical experience beyond a private, subjective moment, and toward a more sustained engagement with a wider, communal mystical process that includes its communication (McGinn 1991: p. xviii).

Within this wider consideration, the importance of mystical experience is not lessened. The mystical experience is one of all-encompassing actuality, which both saturates one's world with the transcendent, and draws one to ascend beyond that world. Indeed, according to McGinn, 'One thing that all Christian mystics have agreed on is that the experience in itself defies conceptualization and verbalization, in part or in whole' (McGinn 1991: p. xvii). As such the mystical experience is less an informational experience, than it is a transformational encounter (McGinn 1991: p. xvii). The challenge for the mystic is to find a form that records and enacts the unique nature of their experience. This in turn shifts our scholarly attention to the range of linguistic and stylistic strategies that aim to enact the state of mystical experience for the reader. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that these accounts exist in tension with the aim to express the immediacy of the mystical experience. Gadamer's characterization of writing as a kind of 'alienated speech' is helpful (Mazzoni 2007: 105–22). In writing, 'meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down' (Gadamer 1997: 393–4). The reader then transforms words back into performative meaning. As part of the attempt to address the fundamental challenge of mysticism to find a form that can record and enact the originary mystical experience, some mystics turn to poetics. Poetics can make demands upon the reader that differ in kind and magnitude from those required by discursive forms of writing, and in this way it is a genre capable of addressing the transformative end of mystical composition. To understand mystical poetics is therefore not to focus upon a subjective experience, but a communicative process. It is a creative enterprise that expresses through rhythm the human desire to live in relation to God, and the transformative capacity of living that relationship.

The ability of poetry to make these transformative demands arises in part from its unique rhythmic nature, which recapitulates the rhythmic nature of human experience itself. Rhythm is integral to our physical being, embodied in life and death, inhalation and exhalation, sleep and wakefulness. Equally it manifests itself in our external world, in our experience of the days, seasons, and tides. Most important here, it is definitive of the spiritual lives of individuals, in the dynamic between sin and redemption, spirit and flesh, secular and religious. This last rhythmic set, characterized by its movement 'from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,' both expresses and enacts the relationship between humans and God, finite and infinite. Only in this rhythmic oscillation does the creature maintain and retain its identity in relation to the created. Rhythm (*ῥυθμός*), derived from the ancient Greek to flow (*ῥεῖν*), establishes what its etymology suggests, performing, and hence enacting, a flowing relationship between divinity and creation. The embodying of this relationship by the poet is eloquently described by Shakespeare

in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in a passage that refers to the divine poetic madness of the *Phaedrus*, which sets out an oscillatory pattern that would be formative for the Christian Neoplatonic tradition:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(5.1.13–18; Foakes 1984: 124)

Here the poet and mystic share a common task. This rhythmical character may be found in Greek, Jewish, and Christian reflections, which bring together both spiritual and poetic rhythm. These examples demonstrate the capacity of poetics to perform, and hence enact, a transformative union between divinity and creation in the spiritual life of the believer.

Platonic Poetry

Theseus' lines from Shakespeare's comedy draw directly upon Plato's *Phaedrus*, which articulates the need for true poets to enter a state of madness so that they may move beyond the confines of human conceptual knowledge, and be filled with the knowledge of the gods (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a ff.; Cooper 1997: 522). Most are familiar with Plato's opinions on poetry and the poets from book 10 of the *Republic*, but the exile of those poets concerned with mere entertainment from the ideal republic ought to be weighed against the opinion Socrates offers in his lesser read dialogue the *Ion*. Here Plato describes the special relationship the poets have to the gods in the production of poetry:

For of course poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true. For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy.

(Plato, *Ion* 534b–c; Cooper 1997: 942)

For Plato, the poets are recipients of a 'divine gift', but this occurs at the cost of their intellects: 'they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them' (Plato, *Ion* 534d; Cooper 1997: 942). For Plato, poetry can convey to us divine truths, but the true poets must become emptied vessels, dumb to the very truth they bear within themselves. Only as an emptied self can the poet, with the

unconscious pathology of the honeybee, shuttle back and forth, in the rhythmic oscillation of verse, to and from the divine source. For Plato, it is not the poets who master their subject, but the subject that masters *them* (Plato, *Ion* 534c; Cooper 1997: 942). Plato goes on to explain that we, as the audience, may gain access to the truth the poets convey, but this is not a direct transfer of knowledge. Instead, Plato develops the analogy of magnetic rings, where the truth poetry conveys diminishes in potency at each stage of removal from its divine source (Plato, *Ion* 533d–e, 535a–b; Cooper 1997: 942–3). Here Plato establishes the central problem of the tension between the divine object and the inability of either finite minds or finite words to contain it. Equally, he suggests the rhythm of both emptying and filling as a means to address this challenge.

Hebrew Creation

The Greek notion of poetic making would be essential for later Christian mystics, as would the Jewish notion of creation, which would give humans a special role within it.¹ Plato and Platonism does not have the Hebrew concept of a personal God, through whose will the world is created, and by which humans are given a special role in that creation. Similar to the divine–creature rhythmic oscillation we find in Plato, the creation of Genesis begins with the institution of a rhythmic relationship. Creation is preceded by stasis in which the ‘Spirit of God hovered over the waters’ (Gen. 1: 2). Then, through the productive action of the Spirit, God created the most basic rhythms of creation: light and dark, day and night, seasons, days and years (Gen. 1: 5, 14). In the act of creation, God’s word is more than a means of communication with humans; it is also the creative power of God (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 9, etc.; Ps. 33: 6). When humans are created, they are made in the image of God. As the image-bearers of the divine they are created to have a relationship with God, and equally, as *imago Dei*, they are given a special relationship to creation as co-creators (Gen. 1: 27). Humans are to continue and extend the creative activity of God through fruitful multiplication, and they are to have dominion over creation (Gen. 1: 28). However, beyond this, extending the artistic metaphor, humans become the readers of divine poetry, as Nicholas of Cusa later explained, when we investigate the proportions of things through arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, we ‘are led to marvel at the divine art and excellence’ (Nicholas of Cusa, ed. Bond 1997: 166). Furthermore, in their creative poetical capacity, humans can also participate as co-creators, in the capacity of what Shaftesbury described as a ‘second maker, a just Prometheus under Jove’ (Shaftesbury, ed. den Uyl 2001: i. 129). Consequently, humans occupy a middle position between God and the rest of creation. As we shall see, when combined with the Christian anthropology, this establishes a strongly rhythmic relation, and a natural anthropological end in divinity that overcomes the necessity for Platonic madness.

¹ The Song of Songs is considered later in this chapter.

Christian Kenosis

In the Christian revelation, the Platonic emptying of the poet, and the human place and role within creation of the Jewish tradition, are brought together. The Johannine Logos is described as the creative word of God who becomes incarnate as Jesus Christ (John 1: 1). With the incarnation of the Word, the poet need no longer leave the intellect behind. Instead, the 'divine gift' previously only accessible through the loss of the intellect is made incarnate through Christ, and consequently available to the intellect. The Platonic pattern, however, is not entirely left behind. Though the believers need not empty themselves of their intellect and go mad, there remains an act of self-emptying in the conscious emulation of Christ. In his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul describes the action of Christ as one of self-emptying (*ἐκένωσεν*). This kenotic act of the sacrifice of his equality with God serves as a model whereby humans can approximate divinity, just as divinity approximates humans:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2: 4–8)

Paul's exaltation, to be of the same mind as Christ, draws not a direct comparison, but an analogical one between Christ and the believer. Believers do not engage in an outpouring of divinity, but in an outpouring of their own wills, so that they might become more Christ-like. In both directions, there is a transformative flow between divinity and humanity. In Christ, this flow is crystallized in the form of his hypostatic union, whereas for believers it becomes a rhythmic oscillation between spirit and flesh, and sin and redemption modelled on Christ's kenotic self-emptying, and the believer's being filled by God's grace. This rhythmic pattern in the life of the believer is given meter through life in the Church, in its calendar, and in its liturgy.

POETRY AND MYSTICAL POETRY

The tension between the finite and the infinite that establishes the rhythmic oscillation disclosed in each of the Greek, Hebrew, and Christian models is also at the centre of mystical poetry. The unique nature of the mystical poet's object, and the particular challenge of their task, places the mystic's own use of language at odds with other established forms. Their deliberations are neither that of discursive mathesis, nor cognitive mimesis. Unlike other forms of theological reflection, mystical poetics does not record or systematically order a particular understanding of God. At the same time, mystical poetry is set apart from other forms of poetry. In general it is possible to say

that poets are concerned with the manifest created universe, whilst the mystic is concerned with the singular, immutable absolute behind creation. Further, whilst all poetry is concerned with something of an ineffable quality in its object, mystical poetry is concerned with the most ineffable (so much so that calling its object an 'object' itself becomes problematic). Finally, while each poet must struggle with the limitations of language in order to communicate their end, the mystical poet is particularly challenged by the earth-bound nature of human utterance. Mystical poets, therefore, are required to engage in a strategy of rhythmic double movement, so that their readers might behold both what is beyond the rational mental discipline of the sciences, and the imitative representation of the mimetic arts.

Because their subject can never fully be described through the positive language of presence, absence equally plays a role in the mystic's goal of describing the experience of the divine. Cataphatic and apophatic discourse almost always exist together in dynamic tension (Sells 1994: 206–18). Paradoxically, in the double movement of mystical poetry, the infinite nature of the divine subject also means that there is no language that does not relate to it as symbol, that is, literally as a mark (*σύμβολον*) of the divine creator. This is the insight afforded to the mystic in their experience of divine union, and from this insight mystical poets regain all language on a higher symbolic plane. Language becomes approximate and playful, capable of giving presence to absence, materiality to the immaterial, lexicon to the non-lexical. But in order to do this, mystics must possess, beyond their personal insight, a poetical capacity, or better, linguistic virtuosity, which allows them to take advantage of this realization.

The term *virtuoso* is frequently used to describe one who has a special skill in the interpretative performance of music. Virtuosi often walk a fine line between brilliant interpretative performance that reveals the familiar as new, and dangerous indulgence that takes them too far from the original. The case is not dissimilar for the mystic, who aims to show God anew, but who does not claim to offer a new revelation. Virtuosi mystical poets possess a proficiency that allows them to bring the reader along, first by familiar paths, and then to increasingly unfamiliar territory. In doing so, mystical poets disrupt expectations, but nevertheless hold the reader through the superiority of their poetic creation. As a reader's world is subverted, everything is at stake, all truth lies before the reader, not as static, but as charged with living, breathing intensity. The work of the virtuoso presents an incongruity, something that cannot be assimilated and that defies understanding. Yet the reader cannot simply cast off this unassimilability, because, while it defies, it simultaneously assimilates the reader into its new logic. Such incongruity makes us aware of a gap between the everyday understanding of the self in its world and the real nature of being. In the work of the mystical poet, one does not encounter a fulfilment of one's expectations of the divine. Instead, we come to see their contingency and incompleteness. In doing so the reader does not come to know God as an object, rather in overcoming those finite beliefs that separate the reader from God's infinite reality they escape the ceaseless reifying of the transcendent into delimited language. This is possible through the language of poetics, which is formed by the words of everyday discourse, but which are set apart from this discourse by the form in which

they are encountered. Our everyday language aims to communicate directly, and avoid equivocacy. Indeed, the word ‘transparency’, giving the connotation of seeing through the word to the thing itself, has today become synonymous with truthfulness. Poetry does the opposite with words. Its figurative language explores nuance and delights in multiple meaning, exposing the radical similarity between the seemingly incongruent, and the profound incongruity amongst the seemingly similar. Its lyric discloses an internal rhythm, greater than any individual word, divulging the connective tissue of creation that links humans and the divine.

THE MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION OF POETRY

Within the development of Christian mysticism we first see this transformative use of poetic language not in mystical poetry, but in the scriptural exegesis of the Greek Fathers that would give birth to Christian mystical poetry. The first use of the adjective *mystikos* is by Clement of Alexandria to describe the language of scripture, Christ and his teaching, and the deeper understanding that arose from its study (McGinn 1991: 100–8; Clement, *Stromateis* 5.6.37; Stählin 1960: 351–2). Clement and other early Greek Fathers including Origen and the Cappadocians used mystical interpretation as a means of seeking out secret or hidden Christological meaning in scripture (Bouyer 1980: 42–55). The practice of mystical interpretation is an ethical and spiritual exercise that transforms its practitioners. Through exegesis, the hidden meaning vested in scripture, made available through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is renewed, allowing the exegete to know God more wholly. The application of this language of transformation to the description of personal mystical experience occurs later, as we shall see, with the production of mystical poetry.

Nowhere was this transformative power found more by the early Fathers than in one of the Bible’s most influential poetic books, the Song of Songs. In turning to the canticle, they were building upon, and likely influenced by, Jewish and Gnostic precedents. The Christian reading of the Song, where Christ is the bridegroom of the Church (Matt. 9: 15, 25: 1–13; John 3: 28–9; Eph. 5: 23–5; Rev. 19: 7, 9), is anticipated in the *Midrash Rabbah*, where God is the bridegroom. Esoteric commentaries, which may have influenced Origen, took this reading further, considering the canticle to be an act of divine self-description, rendering the text the most holy of all books (McGinn 1991: 20–1; Scholem 1965: 38). Additionally, whilst Christianity maintained that the central salvific message of scripture was open to all, the Gnostic notion of uncovering esoteric meaning provided a model for various possible levels of poetic meaning in scripture. In the case of the Song of Songs, Origen explains, this would allow the initiated exposed to the Canticle’s erotic language to hear its poetry ‘in purity and with chaste ears’ (Origen 1957: 22).

All interpreters provide their own justifications for their attention to the Song of Songs, but there are overarching reasons for this attention in the poetics of the text itself. Robert Alter maintains that the Song of Songs is the only biblical text that is free from both instruction and exhortation. There is no priestly hierophant or annalist of a people's history. It consists instead of the voices of two lovers, longing for and enticing one another (Alter 1985: 186). Furthermore, nowhere more in the Bible, he contends, does one find the transfer of meaning, where one thing is represented by or through another, than in the poetry of the Song of Songs (Alter 1985: 189). The text is replete with symbolic language attested to by a catalogue of figurative forms of language—anabasis and catabasis, chiasmus, metaphor, metonymy, meiosis, parallelism, paronomasia, periphrasis, pleonasm, simile, synecdoche—that can be identified in the text (Hunt 2008). These two observations, that the story is free from didactic and historical content, and that the text is characterized by symbolic representation, reflect how the text introduces a degree of ambiguity or openness where meaning is connoted rather than literally denoted. This, combined with the evocative nature of its erotic subject, leaves the text open to continual reflection, a successive process of searching, and the making and remaking of meaning that naturally arises from the contemplation of the divine.

Origen, probably the most influential interpreter of the Song of Songs, establishes a means of mystical interpretation that would be fundamentally influential on the subsequent development of Christian mysticism (Astell and Cavadini 2013: 28–32; Astell 1990: 1–8, 17; Matter 1990: 20–41; McGinn 1991: 108–30). The aim of exegesis is to open the reader to the transformative experience of Christ's presence through the interpretative possibilities that the scriptures offer. In the prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs Origen explains that the three books by Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, correspond to the threefold division of knowledge, which he calls moral, natural, and inspective (Origen 1957: 40). For Origen, these things remained hidden, but are now revealed through Christ incarnate and the pedagogy of the Logos. God's self-emptying act makes the Word both manifest and available in both Christ and scripture. This in turn allows believers to empty themselves of the selfish will of the flesh, and become more God-like (McGinn 1991: 11; Torjesen 1985: 39–41, 130–8). Once one has learned to act in an ethically informed manner, and one's habits are conducted according to the natural order, the soul may 'proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love' (Origen 1957: 44). According to Origen, this final stage of study 'is that by which we transcend visible things and contemplate somewhat of things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight' (Origen 1957: 40).

In this highest stage of mystical interpretation the evocative physical imagery becomes the means for a transformative spiritual experience. For Origen's initiate, the words of the female speaker are no longer associated with the physical. Instead, physical eros, educated by the Word by the time the Song of Songs is encountered, is led back to its transcendent source. One need look no further than the famous opening lines: 'Let

him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine' (Song 1: 2). When the lover is God, then the most physical imagery of the poem becomes the means to describe the most spiritual of relationships. Origen explains: 'When her mind is filled with divine perception and understanding without the agency of human or angelic ministration, then she may believe that she has received the kisses of the Word of God himself' (Origen 1957: 61). The Song of Songs then describes the direct reception of God's teaching in the most immediate physical image. The mouth is the orifice through which the rest of the body is most accessible. Through it nourishment is received, and from it communication is uttered. Here communication, by virtue of receiving a kiss, then wine, is silenced to reception, and then induced to inebriated panegyric. As with many lines in the song, the kiss is situated within a structure of intensification, when the love that the kiss expresses is described as better than wine, with all its intoxicating qualities (Alter 1985: 62–84). While lines like these intensify the description, they also introduce an ambiguity through their use of figurative language that, when read in the context of the relationship between humanity and divinity, became key to the development of allegorical and typological methods for the interpretation of scripture. The poem as a whole stresses proximity and vulnerability, which open the individual to the experience of God's presence. The distinction between the outer and inner meaning of scripture developed by Origen, particularly in relation to the Song of Songs, was advanced by influential monastic figures such as Gregory of Nyssa, and later Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, and Rupert of Deutz. With the last of these figures the description of the experience of God through the reading of scripture would become personalized to the degree that it would move beyond exegesis (McGinn 1994: 328–33; Astell and Cavadini 2013: 28).

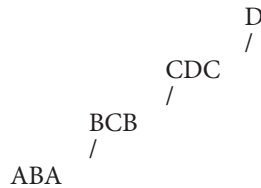
THE VERNACULAR POET-MYSTIC

The development of vernacular mysticism, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, witnesses a shift from reading and reflection upon scriptural poetry, from which arises mystical experience, to the use of poetry itself to record first-person narratives of mystical experience. Here, we explore the rise of mystical poetry will be explored with varying foci through the examples of Dante Alighieri, Jacopone da Todi, Hadewijch van Antwerpen, and Angelus Silesius. The emergence of mystical poetry is part of a larger shift toward first-person accounts of the encounter with the divine, often with the aim of providing a programme for the reader to experience a similar union themselves (Renevey 2013: 564). The reasons for this vernacular development are the subject of much recent scholarly attention (Georgianna 2006: 87–94). For the purposes of this study its import lies in the application of the poetic capacities expressed in scripture, through the familiar force of the vulgar tongue, to individual experience. In the short studies that follow, individual experience may either come in the form of the author's

own personal first-person experience, as is the case with Jacopone and Hadewijch, or the first-person experience of a character, either Dante's pilgrim or Silesius's Cherubic Wanderer.²

Dante

It is difficult not to begin with Dante (1265–1321) and his *Divina Commedia* (1309–20), written in his native Tuscan Italian. Dante developed *terza rima*, characterized by tercets forming a chain rhyme pattern (ABA BCB CDC DED, and so forth). This style interlinks each stanza to the next, by rhyming the first line of each new stanza with the middle line of the preceding tercet. This triune pattern doubtless suggests the dynamic unity of the Trinity, but more than this, it offers a pattern of ascent, with the middle line of each gesturing upward and beyond itself to the next stanza (Figure 13.1).



This combination of repetition and progress, enacted throughout the three-part epic, is also repeated in the work's content. The progress of the poet-pilgrim, and the reader who accompanies him on his journey, is from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Dante uses his poetic virtuosity first to bring his readers into the world of the *Comedy*, then to subvert this world, and in so doing effect an apophatic move whereby their expectations of the divine are undermined. The strangeness of the figure of Beatrice provides the strongest example among the many that are encountered in the text. The fellow poet Virgil, Dante's trusted guide through the Inferno and up the mountain of Purgatory disappears near the summit and is replaced by Beatrice—a character readers know is coming, yet of whom they know not what to think. It is at this point that the full force of virtuosic irony enters the text. Beatrice is Dante's own personal Jesus, the object of eros from the *Vita Nuova* apotheosized into the way of salvation. Through Beatrice, Dante offers his own vision presented as testament. It is Beatrice who is the efficient cause for Dante's journey of redemption. For the pilgrim to have been met by Christ, for example,

² The question of distinguishing between 'real' and 'invented' records is not addressed here. Whilst some individuals presumably did record their own experiences through poetry, apart from the written record, there is no way to make this distinction, if indeed it is possible to make it. The contrast between Dante and Hadewijch is an excellent illustration of this. We can largely assume that Dante's first-person narration of mystical experience was 'invented' in the same way as we may suspect, but are unable to affirm, that Hadewijch's experience was 'real'.

would have given the reader yet another interpretative handle, a familiar figure of authority and doctrine to appeal to for meaning. Instead, they are met by the aloof figure of an obscure thirteenth-century Florentine girl with whom Dante had fallen in love at first sight when she was 8 and he 9. Through this strange creation, Dante deprives his readers of the known God. Yet despite this, Dante's readers are left with no choice but to follow, for they have been seduced into Dante's world, and are captive to the meaning the poet creates. In this manner, Beatrice recapitulates the complete and utter incongruity of Christ. For Dante, the absolutely fantastical notion that God would appear in the figure of a poor first-century Jew from the backwater colony of Galilee, was an incongruity that had been reified into the doctrinal figure at the centre of the dominant meaning-making force in Western civilization. Beatrice recapitulates this incongruity. By confronting the reader with a reality presented as religious truth, yet without pre-assigned meaning, an entirely new consciousness of subjective appropriation opens up.

Beatrice, as Dante's own Christ, represents the possibility of a mystical union which he is still prevented from achieving because of the finite nature of his own understanding. This is illustrated in the moment where, at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, he stares into her green eyes, and sees the alternating image of the lion and the eagle:

As the sun in a mirror, not otherwise / twofold within them shone, / now with one nature, now with the other. // Think, reader, if I marvelled, / when he beheld the thing itself stand still, / and yet its image transformed itself.

Come in lo specchio il sol, non altrimenti
la doppia fiera dentro vi raggiava,
or con altri, or con altri reggimenti.

Pensa, lettor, s'io mi maravigliava,
quando vedea la cosa in sé star queta,
e ne l'idolo suo si trasmutava.

(Dante, *Purgatorio*, XXXI. 121–6; Chimenz 2003: 596)³

The gryphon, the two-form beast in one, is a representation of the union of man and God, a symbol of the hypostatic union and incarnate love that takes the form of Beatrice in Dante's fantasy. Here, her nature, itself a union through love of finite and infinite, remains divided in Dante's own understanding. Nevertheless, what cannot be represented as united is nevertheless expressed as one, both in the rhythmic oscillation of the lines and the image.

In the final canto of *Paradise*, readers experience the end of their apophatic journey. Here the poet's powers are only negative, they can only abstract from the understanding. What follows is Dante's beatific vision. Staring into the light at the height of the Empyrean, Dante is presented with three self-reflecting Trinitarian circles, painted with the effigy of man. As he strains his eyes to see the way in which the human shape is suited

³ Throughout poetry is quoted in its original language and translated literally. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

to the circle, achieving mystical union between humanity and the triune transcendent God, he is struck by the answer in a flash (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 140; Chimenz 2003: 910). However, it is at this very moment of insight that the poet Dante reports:

Here the high imagination could not; / But now my will was turning with my desire,
like wheels / with an even motion, together with // the love that moves the sun and
other stars.

A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele.

(Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 142–5; Chimenz 2003: 910–11)

In the lines preceding, Dante references the impossibility of squaring the circle (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 133–5; Chimenz 2003: 910). Just as the circle cannot be measured by the terms of the square, Dante's simile states that the divine cannot ever be expressed in human terms. Understanding cannot communicate this moment because here the self moves beyond understanding. Here, where all meaning falls away, the nothingness of the self that apophysis has made possible aligns itself with the unutterable transcendence of God. In this moment Dante describes the Pilgrim's will and desire, the ground of individual identity, as aligned with the infinite love of God. It is in this complete ontological indeterminacy, free of the reifying tendency of the finite understanding, free even of religion, that mystical union is achieved. In the *Commedia*, the end of each of the cantiche recording Dante's three-part pilgrimage resolves itself in a single line that rhymes with the middle rhyme of the previous tercet. In the *Inferno*, this links to the first line of the *Purgatorio*, and likewise between the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, leading the reader on a constant upward journey. In the final cantica Dante concludes with triune rhythm referring beyond itself once more, but this time not to another part, but to the divine force behind the dynamic Trinity: 'the love that moves the sun and other stars' (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 145; Chimenz 2003: 911). Here the rhythmic oscillation ends, explained above as key to the pattern of mystical poetry, and the poem falls silent.

Jacopone da Todi

Of the sources that came to constitute the birth of Italian vernacular poetry, Dante occupies the most honoured place. However, numbered among his few predecessors is a Franciscan friar and mystic who wrote with a spiritual intensity and emotive lyricism not before seen in the language. Born Jacopo dei Benedetti (c.1236–1306), after the death of his wife he became a *bizoccone*, a holy repentant fool. Though conversant in Latin,

Jacopone wrote his *laude* in the vernacular. These range from bitter diatribes against corruption in the Church to paeans about the ecstasy of divine love. The development of his poetry reflects his own spiritual growth, from crisis and conversion, to controversy and exile, to reflection and reconciliation, increasing in the richness and complexity of mystical insight they display.

The ballad-form of the *lauda* that Jacopone employed had already been adopted from its secular origins, most notably by Francis himself, as evinced in his famous *Cantico delle Creature*. The form, derived from Provençal lyric love poetry, is characterized by the *tenson*, usually taking the shape of a dramatic dialogue between lovers. The *tenson*, also called the *tenso* or *tenzon*, from the old Provençal word for dispute or quarrel, was originally an interlocutory challenge between two troubadours. The challenging troubadour first offers two opposing statements, and calls upon his adversary to choose one. The challenger then takes up the remaining position, and an exchange follows with both troubadours maintaining the metre of the initial challenge. This rhythmic dialectical structure became a fundamental vehicle of expression for Jacopone's spiritual journey. *Lauda* 3 explores the tension between the demands of the body through the use of the *tenson*: 'Hear a *tenson* which takes place between the body and the soul' ('Audite una 'ntenzone, ch'è 'nfra l'anema e 'l corpo') (Jacopone, *Laude*, 7.1; Mancini 1990: 31). In this poem stanzas alternate between the voices of the body and soul, the body complaining bitterly to the soul, and the soul mortifying the body toward its end: 'Filthy evil body, luxurious and greedy / I always find you deaf to my salvation / Suffer the lashes of this gnarled cord' ('Sozzo, malvascio corpo, lussurioso e 'ngordo, / ad onne mea salute sempre te trovo sordo; / sostiene lo fragello d'esto nodoso cordo') (Jacopone *Laude*, 7.11–13; Mancini 1990: 31). Here the soul, accusing the body of gluttony and lashing it, continues by saying that it must dance to what it perceives as discord. This requirement that the body attune itself to the soul is repeated in alternating quatrains as the soul piteously resists.

The vigorous mortification of the third *lauda* is replaced in the similarly structured *lauda* 43 by the internal struggle towards virtue between the hatred of evil and the need to love, the rage against sin and the sin of rage, and the withdrawal of contemplative life and the obligation to active ministry. Within the quatrains themselves, each verse has an interior rhyme, which reinforces the inseparable tension experienced by Jacopone acted out in rhythmic oscillation. However, this tension provides no resolution, as his concluding metaphor submits: 'I remain caught between two blades of shears each cutting into me / now I will shorten my speech and end here' ('demoro enfra le forfede, cias-cun coltel m'affétta, / abrevio mea ditta, en questo loco finire') (Jacopone, *Laude*, 43.61–2; Mancini 1990: 140).

In later *laude* the move beyond the binary logic of spirit and flesh is expressed by the inability of this binary to incorporate Christ's love. This is articulated in the experience of *nichil*, an apophatic nothingness, brought upon by a realization of the measureless nature of the superabundant divine love that is the efficacious end of the incarnation:

'O love, you love so much / that I cannot say how much this love is because it is / because it is immeasurable!' (Jacopone *Laude*, 82.1–3; Mancini 1990: 281).

The hypostatic union, effected in the loving action of the incarnation, is capable of suspending the opposition of spirit and flesh in Christ, and the senses and intellect of the believer:

All acts, old and new, / are founded on nothingness, / are formed without form, / have no ending or number, / are united with truth / affection is crowned / the intellect is quitted / in love is transformed.

Tutti li atti vecchi e novi
enn un nichil so' fundati;
so' formati senza forma,
non n' ò termen né quantetate;
uniti co la Veretate,
coronato sta l'Affetto,
quietato lo 'Ntelletto
ne l'Amore trasformato.

(Jacopone, *Laude*, 82.68–75; Mancini 1990: 283)

In his earlier *laude*, the intellect fought for the interest of the soul against the flesh, or struggled to contemplate what seemed to be the madness of Christ's love. Equally, the emotions endeavoured to find the correct path to virtue, or longed for union with Christ. Here, however, the *tenson* is no more, and love beyond sight or sound, without form or number, founded not on foundation, but upon infinity, quietens the intellect, and transforms emotion from a reflection of the self, into a reflection of divinity.

In one of his last *lauda*, Jacopone describes the final stages of his mystical journey, where his soul almost comes to be unified with Christ: 'In Christ transformed, it is almost Christ, / Conjoined with God the soul is all divine.' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.99–100; Mancini 1990: 322). This intoxication with the divine is reflected in the cracking of the *tenson* found in the ecstatic song of love with which the *lauda* ends:

Love, Love-Jesus, I have reached the port, / Love, Love-Jesus, you have brought me here, / Love, Love-Jesus, comfort me, / Love, Love-Jesus, you have enflamed me so much, / Love, Love-Jesus, consider my needs, / Allow me to stay, love, in your embrace, / With thee transformed in true charity, / In the supreme truth of transformed love.

Amor, Amor-Iesù,	so' ion'ta pporto,
Amor, Amor-Iesù,	tu m'ài menato,
Amor, Amor-Iesù,	damme conforto,
Amor, Amor-Iesù,	ssì m'ài enflammato,
Amor, Amor-Iesù,	pensa l'opporto,
famme en te stare,	Amor, sempre abbracciato,
con teco trasformato	en vera caritate
e 'n summa veretate	de trasformato amore.

(Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.251–8; Mancini 1990: 326–7)

Here the repetition of love literally threatens to overcome the form of the poem. At one point a remarkable interruption occurs, when the voice of Christ breaks in and calls Jacopone away from his ecstasy: 'Restrain this love, you who love me; / no virtue can be found without order!' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.147–8; Mancini 1990: 323). In response Jacopone protests that his love madness is not his fault, and in the audacity of intoxicated love blames Christ for his condition. In a final development, enfolded into the unfathomable love of God, the soul becomes indistinguishable from the object of its desire, and in so becoming, its will and intellect are annihilated, and refounded upon nothingness: 'This height of heights / founded upon nothingness [nichil] / shaped in nothing / is established in the Lord' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 92.337–40; Mancini 1990: 345). This is the culminating moment of the continuous upward path of mystical ascent presented as the life story of Jacopone's spiritual journey through the lauda. There is, however, yet a more common mystical pattern, wherein the mystic undergoes repeated union and separation, and for this we may look to the poetry of Hadewijch.

Hadewijch

Hadewijch van Antwerpen (fl. 1200) has been considered one of the greatest poetic geniuses of the Low Countries, and the greatest writer of all medieval women (Mommers 1980: p. xiii; van Baest 1998: 7; McGinn 1998: 200–1). A Flemish beguine, writing in Brabantian Middle Dutch, her poetic virtuosity is exercised in her appropriation and adaptation of the motif and form of secular northern French *trouvère* love poetry to her unique form of *Minnemystik*. This is manifest in her greatest poetical achievement, the *Strophische Gedichten*, or stanzaic poems. In the *hohe Minne* tradition, the representation of love usually presents itself as absence and potential, as opposed to presence and fulfilment. As such, Hadewijch most often casts God as the female mistress, and herself as the knight errant, with love (*minne*) as the dynamic that defines the relationship between the two. Much consideration has gone into understanding what Hadewijch means by the term *minne* (McGinn 1998: 200–22), however for our poetical purposes we may turn to a definition that she offers in her twenty-second stanzaic poem, where she describes what she 'discerns in love's nature (*beinne in minnen natuere*)' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, l. 15; van Baest 1998: 159; van Mierlo 1942: 140):

It has no form, no cause nor shape either, / And yet it makes itself to be tasted as a created reality. / It is the material of my blessedness, / Which I long after at all times; / Thus I suffer my days in much bitterness.

En hefft forme, sake noch figure;
Doch eest inden smake also creatuere;
Hets materie miere bliscap
Daer ic in alre tijt na hake
Dus leidic mine daghe in meneghen suere.

(Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 17–21;
van Baest 1998: 157; van Mierlo 1942: 140)

Here *minne* is a force that has the nature of divinity, formless, without cause, and invisible. At the same time Hadewijch experiences it at the most visceral level when she writes that it makes itself to be *tasted* as creature. Her descriptive choice is especially noteworthy, for it is neither sight nor sound, touch nor smell, but taste, the most intimate of senses. Her interaction involves the active physical consumption of *minne*, an internalization that evokes both erotic and eucharistic contexts. This physicality is reinforced when she describes love as 'the material of my blessedness', the absence of which is the cause of much bitterness (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 17–21; van Baest 1998: 159; van Mierlo 1942: 140). Through love's poetic materialization, Hadewijch is better able to evoke its absence and the ever-present longing that accompanies it.

Throughout the twenty-second poem, and the stanzaic works in general, Hadewijch uses the ever unconsummated union at the centre of chivalric literature to bring together the extremities of joy and suffering, labour and tranquillity, speech and silence, visibility and invisibility (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 13, 24, 33; van Baest 1998: 159–61; van Mierlo 1942: 139–40), so that she can evoke what she calls the savage wasteland of love's landscape: 'So savage a wasteland never was created / As love (*minne*) can make in her landscape!' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 29–30; van Baest 1998: 161; van Mierlo 1942: 140). This characterizes the complex and sophisticated love affair that is at the heart of Hadewijch's poetry. The love she describes is not the unreflective and confident new love of sweetness and infatuation. Rather it is defined by the terrifying paradox of experiencing the inescapable necessity of the self as the vehicle that affords the possibility of *minne*, and necessity to escape the self that would allow *minne* to be consummated.

Hadewijch describes this moment in the seminal fortieth stanzaic poem, when opposites coincide in love's abyssal nature: 'To whoever love (*minnen*) overthrows so that he may overpower her / Her sweet nature will yet become manifest' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 40, ll. 33–4; van Baest 1998: 269; van Mierlo 1942: 257). Only in the overwhelming overthrow of self by *minne*, and in the overpowering of *minne* by the self is the paradox overcome. This saturation is repeated by the saturation of the word itself into the stanza that describes the ecstatic moment:

Then he experiences good speed in love to the full, / Where love with love pours love
out all of her love. / And thus love is all sated with love, / Where he has fruition of
sweet love.

Soe heeft hi vol der *minnen* spoet
Daer *minne* met *minnen* haer *minne* al scincket
Ende so werdt die *minne* al *minne* volvoet
Daer hi ghebruket der sueter *minnen*.

(Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 40, ll. 45–8; van Baest 1998: 269;
van Mierlo 1942: 257)

This is why the description of love is always one that is characterized for Hadewijch by suffering, burden, and separation, since the self is both the obstacle and path to union.

Consequently, the moment of union in which love can become known may only ever be one of anamnesis, when the self recovers itself, but loses its union with love.

Beyond the figurative adaptation of the courtly motif, Hadewijch also refashions its rhythmical form, providing her own virtuosic treatment of the *trouvère* model. In its secular form the genre's lyrical structure takes a highly mnemonic form, reinforcing the structural integrity of the poem, and allowing it to be recalled and performed. This is particularly evident in the use of concatenations, whereby stanzas are linked through the repetition of words or thoughts from the last line of one stanza to the first line of the next. Hadewijch breaks down this tool, eroding it to the point where concatenation is an exception rather than a rule, which renders it all the more appreciable when encountered. It appears in twenty-four of the forty-five stanzial poems, but it surfaces only in fragmentary form occasionally linking stanzas (Guest 1975: 92). The result for Hadewijch's readers was perhaps to leave those versed in the genre with a sense of unfulfilled expectation, or even to challenge them by demanding greater attention to the text. Certainly, her modification has the result of divorcing her production from any ease of repetition.

The fortieth poem of the collection is one of only two exceptions where the chain of stanzial concatenation is almost complete. Ironically, the one break in this poem comes between the two stanzas that describe the ecstatic moment of *minne*, as if to reinforce the fact that it is a moment recalled, the incomplete repetition performing the incomplete representation. Yet where the broken repetition between stanza's breaks the unity, repetition within the stanza reinforces description of the union:

When he feels this sweet love, / He is wounded with her wounds. / When in wonder
he perceives her wonders, / He ardently sucks the ground of love's veins, / Always
thirsting after beginning afresh, / Until he has fruition of sweet love.

Als hi ghevoelt die soete minne,
Wort hi met haren wonden ghewont
Als hi met wondere hare wondere kinnet
Sughet hi met nide der aderen gront
Altoes met dorste van nuwen beghinne
Eer hi gebrucet der zueter minnen.

(Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 40, ll. 35–40;
van Baest 1998: 269; van Mierlo 1942: 257)

Here the overthrowal of self and the overpowering of love is described through repetition. The self wounded with divine wounds indicates at once an opening of the self through which the wounded God might enter, evoking the language of Calvary and kenosis, the loving self-emptying and self-sacrifice of God now repeated in the love of the mystic self. Also in the stanza, alliteration allows Hadewijch to slide from 'wound' (*wonden*) to 'wonder' (*wondere*), when following from the opening made by the wound of love, wonder which defeats understanding opens one up to the reality of the wondrous. Again, erotic and eucharistic imagery is summoned in the thirsty sucking by the

self at the source of love's veins. Despite her being in the company of many others who employ the courtly motif, not the least of whom are her fellow beguine travellers Mechthild von Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, Hadewijch's overwhelming poetical virtuosity is on greatest display in passages such as this.

Angelus Silesius

One of the most unique examples of Baroque period mystical poetry is that of Angelus Silesius (1624–1677). Born Johann Scheffler to a Lutheran family, he was influenced by the thought of Jakob Böhme when studying in Holland. After becoming a physician, doctrinal differences coupled with the condemnation of his mystical visions led him to adopt the resurgent Roman Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. Though he dedicated much time to the production of anti-Protestant polemic, his great achievement remains his mystical work, particularly as it finds expression in his *Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (1657), which he wrote in epigrammatic style, in the popular Alexandrine verse of the day. His adoption of this form repeats the pattern of vernacular mysticism already observed, where a secular form of literature is adapted to mystical ends.

The style is well suited to sagacious statements that render insights into their most essential form. *Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann* is made up of five books of some 1,676 Alexandrine couplets, some of which stand alone, others grouped together. The iambic couplets consist of four hemistiches, or half lines divided by a caesura:

The Godhead is a fountain, from it comes everything / And it also runs backward,
so it is also a sea.

Die GÖttheit ist ein Brunn, || auß jhr kombt alles her:
Und laufft auch wider hin, || drum ist sie auch ein Meer.

(Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, III. 168;
Gnädinger 1985: 137)

This couplet, which demonstrates Silesius' poetical style, equally establishes the central theme of the paradox of the unassailable distinction and indissoluble union between finite creature and infinite God. Silesius exploited the laconic style of the couplets to perform the conceptual and representative paradoxes arising out of the mystical coincidence between the finite and the infinite.

Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann employs the elliptical potentiality of the Alexandrine couplets with virtuosic skill to simultaneously subvert and produce meaning, exercising apophasis and cataphasis in distinct units of scarcely twenty words:

You are not in a place; the place, that is in you. / Throw it out, eternity is already here.
Nicht du bist in dem Orth; der Orth der ist in dir.
Wirfstu jin auß, so steht die Ewigkeit schon hier.

(Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, I. 185;
Gnädinger 1985: 54)

Here place and no-place, time and eternity, are brought into an elliptical relation. Any careful reader coming to this couplet is challenged by its conceptual complexity, and forced to read over its lines more than once. This in turn sets off a hermeneutical vortex made possible through the brevity of the fragment. The more one considers the epigrammatic statement, the more one sees that each of the four hemistichs, each constituting a 'place' (*Orth*) within the statement, may themselves be interchanged with the other. This performative undermining of the idea of finite place that is challenged in the statements content opens up a seeming infinity of permutations (in fact there are twenty-four), collapsing place into no-place.

What Dante accomplishes by way of his cosmic journey, and Jacopone through a poetic lifespan, Silesius condenses into a series of aphoristic fulgurations. The mystical end of such vortices is the undoing of the understanding that separates the mystical self from its end in divine union. Silesius writes: 'Nothing brings the self above itself as does annihilation / The more destroyed you are, the more divinity you have' (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, II. 140; Gnädinger 1985: 92). The form of the Baroque poet-mystic demands meditation and repetition on the part of his reader. Within the narrowest of spaces surveyed, he attempts to make present those flashes of recognition that allow the intellect to escape itself, and body forth, if fleetingly, the notion of unity with God. In his own gnomic way he echoes the insight of Hadewijch, expressing the situation of the mystic, who lives as a cherubic wanderer, in the tension between finite and infinite, between joy and pain, outlined in general terms: 'The soul that only seeks to be nothing but one with God / It lives in constant peace, and has yet constant agony' (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, VI. 176; Gnädinger 1985: 273).

MYSTICAL POETRY AND THE FUTURE OF POETIC MYSTICISM

Just as the emergence of Christian mysticism is bound up with reflection upon poetry, the argument may be made that the future of mysticism is equally intertwined with poetics. The first Christian mystics found in the poetry of scripture a lyrical and figurative language capable of bringing the believer closer to God. The vernacular mystical poets, some examples of whom have been considered here, used the esemplastic capacity of this language to engage and embody the inner spiritual life of the mystical journey. From our present-day position we find these poetic mystics noteworthy, both for their poetic virtuosity, and for the exceptional nature of their religious experience. However, here we must take account of our own perspectival shift. Whilst virtuosic, and therefore unique in their expression, their transcendent experience, intense as it may have been, differed in degree but not in kind from that of the Christian communities of which they were a part. The introversion and exceptionalism that tends to be associated with the idea of mysticism today does not attend to the fact that mystical experience had

its place within the religious life of the community, structured by the Church through its liturgy, scripture, and calendar. All of these provided a cadence to everyday life, wherein the *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (experiential knowledge of God) was part of an overarching transcendent framework of understanding (Largier 2009). Within this transcendent frame, life was never lived without a divine referent. The gradual emergence of an immanent frame, wherein it was possible to construct one's understanding of reality without any relation to the transcendent, substantively reduced the possibility for the everyday experiential knowledge of God. This concept of the immanent frame, which has gained great traction since its introduction by Charles Taylor, helps to explain both why in the present age aesthetics is all the more important as a language for mysticism, but also why the mystic is all the more isolated in speaking a language of transcendence (Taylor 2007).

In an age of immanence, mystical poetics shifts from being one of many forms of religious discourse to one of the few considered available for the expression of religious experience. The long historical decline of religious institutions, along with the authority they held and the communities they constituted, was accompanied by a societal evolution that saw separation of spirituality from religion, which had the effect of privatizing faith. Lacking institutions, traditions, and language, and often viewing its historical forms as problematic or restricting, mystical poetics presents itself within the immanent frame as a form of religious discourse already seemingly liberated from the constraints of institution, tradition, and restricted historical revelation. Its personal aesthetic form of expression presents the possibility of making subjective spirituality objectively utterable without a community, and the ability to make private experience public without appealing to authority. From the Renaissance and Reformation onward we see the status of poetry as a form of religious language increasingly exalted. It is in this context that Shakespeare writes of how the poet's pen 'bodies forth / The forms of things unknown' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.15–16; Foakes 1984: 124), and Philip Sidney claims that God's glory 'in nothing he sheweth so much as in poetry' (Sidney 1962: 8). The Romantics similarly lauded the capacity of poetry to remake religion (Hampton 2019: 13–19). The world of poetry, like religion, writes Friedrich Schlegel, 'is infinite and inexhaustible' (Schlegel 1958–2002: ii. 285), and 'the Poetic Genius', writes William Blake, 'is the true Man' and the source of all religions (Blake 1982: 1).

More recently, with secularism itself, along with the immanent frame becoming an object of critical awareness, the possibility of reconsidering transcendence and mystical poetics in a post-secular age presents itself anew. This is considered in a poem by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski (1945–), titled *Mistyka dla początkujących* (*Mysticism for Beginners*, 1997). The poem describes a situation in which experience, in this case of art and nature, and the words assigned to it, once again open themselves up, in the most elementary and incipient way, to the possibility of the experience of transcendence. In this moment the poet realizes the possibility of forming a language capable of expressing human spirituality, not unlike when the Church Fathers looked upon the Hebrew scripture and found in it a way of expressing their own spiritual lives. The conclusion of Zagajewski's poem describes the return to a beginners' course, which in itself forms the prelude to a test that has been postponed:

mały słowik, który ćwiczył recytację
 tuż przy autostradzie,
 i podróże, wszystkie podróże,
 to była tylko mistyka dla początkujących,
 wstępny kurs, prolegomena
 do egzaminu, który odłożony został
 na później.

the little nightingale practicing / its speech beside the highway, / and any journey,
 and kind of trip, / are only mysticism for beginners, / the elementary course, prelude
 / to a test that's been postponed (Zagajewski, 'Mistyka dla początkujących,' ll. 21-27;
 Zagajewski 2002, 2004).

The traditional language of Christian mysticism, devised within a framework of transcendence, can only problematically be transferred into an age of immanence, without being somehow translated. Yet within the immanent frame aesthetics remains one of the few forms of functional communal spiritual discourse. On the one hand, this is because it, like mysticism, distances itself from the traditional and untranslated language of religion. On the other hand, it is also because the aesthetic resists reduction to mere subjective projection, despite the contemporary domination of immanent, post-metaphysical, forms of discourse. As such, poetry is possessed of the introductory capacity that Zagajewski describes. It is capable, by virtue of its form, within the confines of the immanent frame, of constituting an introductory course in mysticism for beginners. In poetry mysticism returns to its original endeavour of giving presence to absence, materiality to the immaterial, and lexicon to the non-lexical.

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PART III

KEY PATTERNS
OF MYSTICAL
THOUGHT

CHAPTER 14

THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

JOHN ARBLASTER

ON 23 September 2015, President Barack Obama of the United States welcomed Pope Francis to Washington, DC, with a speech on the White House lawn. He addressed the pope with the following words:

You call on all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, to put the ‘least of these’ at the center of our concerns. You remind us that in the eyes of God our measure as individuals, and our measure as a society, is not determined by wealth or power or station or celebrity, but by how well we hew to Scripture’s call to lift up the poor and the marginalized, to stand up for justice and against inequality, and to ensure that every human being is able to live in dignity—because we are all made in the image of God.

(Obama 2015)

Obama’s explicit appeal to humanity being created in the ‘image of God’ reveals not only that this is presumed to be a generally recognized notion, but also that it has profound and enduring relevance for our self-understanding and attitudes towards others. Indeed, Obama invoked this idea to address the relationship between the ability to live in dignity and the divine imperative to be merciful, and specifically towards refugees and immigrants, the marginalized and the outcast, the powerless and the defenceless. This is significant not only because the suffering of refugees or the victims of war is an urgent problem in our own age, but because the very idea that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God was formulated precisely by a displaced people, exiled from their homeland. It is not only with respect to the crises of war and mass migration that the doctrine is relevant, however. As Bernard McGinn has pointedly reminded us, reflecting on humanity as created in the image of God is also particularly pertinent in an age of triumphant secularism, rampant consumerism, and strident religious fundamentalism (McGinn 2010: 19). It would seem then that, at present, the dignity of the human person is as pressing a question as ever.

The ‘image of God’ is the foundational category for all Christian theological anthropology, and a cursory survey of the relevant literature will reveal that the doctrine has been developed—and continues to be developed—in myriad ways throughout the tradition. Indeed, no summary could do justice to its richness and complexity. Consequently, this chapter will seek not to provide an encyclopaedic overview of the development of the doctrine in the Christian tradition (the best of which remain the respective articles dealing with Eastern and Western Christianity in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*), but will rather (i) present the basic biblical background of the doctrine, (ii) examine some of the categories within which the *imago Dei* is currently understood, (iii) explore the ways in which the doctrine was articulated in the patristic period, and (iv)—in view of the nature of the present volume—engage in a retrieval of the thought of some lesser-known though profoundly relevant authors in the Christian mystical tradition. It will become evident that, though contemporary exegesis and systematic theology might reject many aspects of the historical models of the *imago Dei*, there are nevertheless also many—and perhaps unexpected—convergences.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Although it comes first, the creation of the world as it is recounted by the Priestly Source in Genesis 1 is in fact a younger narrative than the Yahwist account in Genesis 2. It is in the first chapter, however, that we find reference to God’s creation of humankind in his own ‘image and likeness.’ This text, which was written during the Babylonian exile, must therefore primarily be seen as Israel’s response to the crisis of self-understanding that it faced as a displaced people living in a foreign land with foreign gods. The creation account is a way of addressing concerns about whether the God of Israel had abandoned his people and thus about his faithfulness to the covenant he had sworn with them. The famous response given to these existential questions is that, even before there was a people or a covenant, when ‘the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,’ it was God himself who brought all things into being, and created humanity to be in a special relationship with him because we are made in his image and likeness. In other words, rather than doubting the faithfulness of God in the face of tribulation, the text reminds us that God was and is always already at the centre of creation, and that his faithfulness is thus the foundational principle of all existence.

Although there is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible that the Fall and expulsion from Eden recounted in Genesis 3 specifically affected humanity’s image character, it is evident that human sin had radical implications for the relationship with God, which was thereafter in need of restoration. In light of the Christ event, the New Testament offers several implicit and explicit statements that would reorient the Christian understanding of the *imago Dei* with respect to creation and restoration. For example, with respect to creation, the Prologue to the Gospel of John claims that ‘all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being,’ establishing that it is

through the Word of God that creation occurred. Similarly, but more explicitly with respect to the *imago Dei*, Paul specifies that '[Christ] is the image of the invisible God . . . for in him all things were created' (Col. 1: 15, 16). According to Paul, if Christ is the perfect image of God, it is in conformity with Christ that humanity is redeemed and restored (cf. Rom. 8: 29; 1 Cor. 15: 49). In other words, the New Testament fundamentally reorients reflection on creation and redemption in the *imago Dei* in a Christological sense.

This is the scriptural groundwork from which Christian theologians throughout the ages have sought to elaborate conceptions of what it means to be a human person, both individually and collectively. Before we move on to some key historical insights that contextualize the mystical authors we will explore, let us first examine the most prevalent models employed in the contemporary debate.

CURRENT APPROACHES

From a historical perspective, McGinn has outlined three central models in *imago Dei* anthropologies from antiquity to the Middle Ages: the intellectual, the volitional, and the interpersonal. McGinn emphasizes that that these traditions are by no means to be thought of as opposed, or even discrete (McGinn 1986: 316 ff.). Proponents of the intellectual position locate the essential nature of the *imago Dei* in human intelligence or rationality and the extent to which it participates in the divine intellection. Generally speaking, this conclusion is reached through an attempt to locate the image of God in a unique human characteristic. So, for example, the capacity for rational thought may be predicated of God and of human beings, but not of animals, and therefore the divine must reside in our rationality. The second, volitional approach similarly begins by differentiating humans and animals, but now the distinction lies in their capacity to will freely. Given that God enjoys complete divine freedom, we image God to the extent that we use our free will in accordance with the divine will. McGinn refers to Bernard of Clairvaux as an exponent of this position. Finally, the interpersonal option locates our image character primarily in our capacity for self-transcendent love, which mirrors that of the Persons of the Trinity. McGinn refers to Richard of St Victor in this regard. As McGinn summarizes, from this perspective, 'being made in the image and likeness of God means being made to share in the shared love of the Trinity, and, like the Trinity, to communicate this love to others' (McGinn 1986: 327).

From a contemporary systematic perspective, Marc Cortez presents a slightly different view. Cortez presents four central models of *imago Dei* anthropology (Cortez 2010). They are the structural, functional, and relational models, as well as a 'multifaceted model', which attempts in some way to combine elements from the other three. The structural model (Cortez 2010: 18–21) seeks to identify the divine image with some essential faculty or set of faculties of the human soul (most commonly, the intellect and the will). This approach would thus encapsulate both the intellectual and volitional models McGinn outlines. Cortez explicitly associates this approach with influential figures

in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. The central problems Cortez identifies in these traditional positions are that they find no biblical support and are inherently individualistic, disembodied, and reductionistic. They should therefore be discarded altogether (Cortez, 2010: 21; see also Green 2015). Some apologists for (some form of) the structural image have, however, emphasized the importance of human capacities such as rationality in the image of God (e.g. Vainio 2014). The attempt to give short shrift to these ancient models of the *imago Dei*, to the extent even that they become something of a caricature, is not particularly satisfactory, since it does no justice to their complexities and nuances. Nor does it take into account the fact that 'structural' models are rarely if ever articulated without reference to other human capacities and activities, as McGinn (1986) also emphasizes.

The functional image (Cortez 2010: 21–24) is elaborated in terms not of ontology but of activity. In this view, the image character of human beings is to be seen as a certain role that humans play on earth as representatives of God. This model recommends itself in part because it is currently the view to which the majority of exegetes subscribe. Indeed, exegetes have long bemoaned the fact that theologians rarely take interest in the relevant technical literature and their interpretations are thus 'frequently strained, sometimes false, and often simply unrecognizable as commentary upon the text' (Bird 1981: 131). Analysing the meaning of the Hebrew terms *selem* (image) and *demut* (likeness) both in the Hebrew Bible and against the background of its Ancient Near Eastern *Umwelt* reveals that the concept of image refers to a physical image (in the Hebrew Bible) and was used to denote divine kingship or the king as God's representative (in Egypt and Mesopotamia). Therefore, Genesis 1 claims not only that human beings are the physical representatives of God on earth but also that this representative function is not limited to kings but is bestowed upon all people. Furthermore, humans represent God specifically by 'having dominion [over all of creation]' (Gen. 1: 26, 28). All human beings are thus considered to exercise a vice-regal function, acting *like* God as his physical representatives. Given its exclusive focus on the first chapter of Genesis, this view suffers from the drawback that, from a Christian point of view, it does not take the whole narrative sweep of salvation history into account, either in the rest of the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament.

Finally, the relational approach (Cortez 2010: 24–7) portrays human beings as imaging God primarily through relationships, either with Godself, with one another, or with other creatures. This reading was popularized particularly by Karl Barth, whose conception of the I–Thou relationship established in Genesis was in turn very much inspired by Martin Buber (Buber 1984). From both exegetical and theological perspectives, this interpretation carries considerable weight. Seeking to reconcile the image accounts in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, it argues that Adam and Eve were created in a harmonious relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation, but that these relationships were destroyed by the Fall. In Christ, however, the true image and thus perfect relationship with God is revealed, and in relationship with Christ our relationships with God, one another, and the world are reformed and rebuilt (for more on Barth's specifically Christological theological anthropology, see

Cortez 2015). Barth therefore argues that the I–Thou relationship between male and female mirrors the I–Thou relationship that constitutes the divine life itself.

These then, according to Cortez, are the basic models according to which reflection on the *imago Dei* is currently pursued by both exegetes and theologians. In isolation, none of these models may be considered satisfactory. Indeed, given the strong arguments against the structural model, Cortez proposes that a successful ‘multifaceted’ approach must in some way bring only the functional and relational images together into a coherent system. What is unclear from Cortez’s analysis, however, is how any of these models can or have ever functioned in isolation to begin with. In a certain sense, for example, the structural model implies some form of relationship because the human capacity or capacities to which it refers only operate as image in so far as they cooperate with God. A structural model that focuses on human intellect will claim that the image resides in the intellect only insofar as the intellect participates in the divine intellection, which presupposes some form of relationship with God. Likewise, the functional image necessarily implies some form of relationship both with God and with creation. To ‘have dominion over’ something necessarily implies that one have some form of relationship with it. Regarding the relational image, we may say that it explicitly also appeals to ontological or structural categories. If a person is created as an interpersonal subject that is inherently relational—either towards God, other people, or creation—this necessarily implies that relationality is not a secondary attribute, but belongs to the ‘structure’ of what it means to be a person.

The history of Christian reflection on the *imago Dei* reveals that aspects of each of these models (and not only these) recur throughout the tradition, though with varying degrees of emphasis and elaboration. It is to this history that we will now turn.

PATRISTIC THOUGHT

It has been argued that it is in the writings of the exegetes in Syria—Ephrem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom—in contrast to the Greek or Latin Fathers that we find the least exegetical embellishment on the text of Genesis (Murray 2000). Chrysostom, for example, strictly aligns the image of Genesis 1: 26 with the dominion over creation that God granted to humankind: ‘image refers to rule and nothing else’ (*Homilies* 8.9; Hill 1986: 110), and thus explicitly advocates a functional interpretation of the image according to which man as God’s steward exercises kind and gentle authority over all other creatures. While this position may thus indeed be a valuable historical witness for our understanding of the responsibility of care we owe to creation, we must also be acutely aware of the problematic aspects of these texts (to which Murray does not refer). In the very same Homily, for example, Chrysostom explicitly excludes women from exercising authority in the image of God: ‘You see, since it is on the basis of command that the image was received and not on the basis of form, man commands everything whereas woman is subservient’ (*Homilies* 8.10; Hill 1986: 111). In other words,

though Chrysostom outlines a functional interpretation in line with Genesis 1: 26, he also radically perverts its meaning, for the emphasis in Genesis is that both male and female are created in God's image, and the one is in no way subordinate to the other. This is but one of many examples of the subordination of women in *imago Dei* theological anthropologies (see Kilner 2015: 31–6 for development in the tradition).

Discussing the image of God in the Greek patristic tradition, Lars Thunberg (1986) has highlighted that here too we find many of the themes that have emerged thus far. An important initial insight is that many of the Eastern Fathers distinguished to a greater or lesser degree between the terms image and likeness due to their reliance on the Septuagint Hebrew Bible (where the terms are rendered *eikon* and *homoiosis*). In the original Hebrew *selem* and *demut* are usually considered to be basically synonymous, though some exegetes allow for a subtle distinction (for discussion on this point see Verde 2018: 242–6). Origen is a striking example in this regard, since for him the distinction is particularly radical. On his view, which posits two creations, the dignity of the image of God was given in the first creation, whereas the perfection of likeness to God was reserved for the eschatological fulfilment. In other words, 'for Origen likeness was acquired by human beings through imitation of God' (Thunberg 1986: 298). This distinction between image and likeness would have immense resonance throughout the tradition.

Second, the Greek Fathers defend a functional view of the image according to which human beings act as God's viceroys on earth. As we have seen, however, current views of the functional image do not usually articulate a Christological dimension. The Fathers solved this problem by arguing that the ability to exercise dominion correctly was corrupted by sin, and that dominion was regained in the restoration wrought by Christ. This evidently contributes a relational dimension to humanity's image character. Furthermore, it is as *rational* viceroys that human beings play this role, and in this respect the Fathers also introduce a spiritual and ontological dimension to their understanding of the image. To quote Thunberg: 'This view may be expressed dialectically. On the one hand, dominion is given through the rational nature of human beings; on the other hand, its exertion depends on the relationship of human beings to God' (1986: 302).

Third, the Fathers claim that in order to exercise the role of God's viceroy in the world, human beings must establish God's intention and purpose for created things. To this end, human beings were imbued with the ability to contemplate the natures of created things, but also to contemplate the revelation of scripture and finally to contemplate God himself. It is in the contemplation of God that God's primary intention for creation is revealed, and this enables human beings both to govern themselves as well as to keep the created order together according to God's plan.

The writings of the Greek Fathers thus constitute a movement from reflections on the exercise of authority over creation to the human capacities that enable this role to be carried out and finally to the contemplation of God in whom the proper intentions for such authority are revealed. A corollary of this shift, however, is that the emphasis of *imago Dei* anthropology came to be placed on the human as a primarily spiritual being that seeks to know God. This is evidently of profound importance for the development of mystical anthropologies in later centuries.

Turning to the Western patristic tradition, the most influential figure for conceptions of the *imago Dei* and subsequent insights in Western Christian mystical literature was undoubtedly Augustine. (The secondary literature is voluminous. The following draws principally on Sullivan 1963, an extensive older treatment, and the more recent studies Drever 2013 and Meconi 2013. For concise but clear overviews see *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 7 (1971): 1418–22, and Pitour 2013.) Augustine categorically locates the *imago Dei* in the human mind (*mens*) and not in the body. As he states in *On Genesis Against the Manichees* (an early work, 388–9): ‘when man is said to have been made to the image of God, these words refer to the interior man, where reason and intellect reside . . . man is said to have been made to the image of God, not on account of his body, but on account of that power by which he surpasses the cattle’ (*On Genesis Against the Manichees* 17.28; Teske 1991: 76). Up to this point, Augustine follows the Greek Fathers. Humanity is granted authority over creation by virtue of its rational capacities.

In his somewhat later *Confessions* (397–401), Augustine famously engages in a profound interior exploration of the self. This is not to be viewed as a solipsistic endeavour, for Augustine fundamentally seeks to know not merely himself, but to discover the presence of God within the self. Since, following Paul’s interpretation of the image, Augustine held that Christ is the only true image of God, human beings must be said to be created *unto* that image (*ad imaginem*). Further, Augustine argued, all images seek to discover the archetype unto which they were created, and humans therefore seek God (for discussion of this, see Meconi 2013: 34–40). In book 10, he analyses the *memoria*, a term used to denote not only the capacity of remembering, but especially also that which we would now call ‘consciousness’, and concludes that God is not to be found in images of material things, in emotional states, or even in the highest part of the memory where it remembers itself, namely the mind (sometimes also called *spiritus*: the deepest part of the self which is, in fact, the point where the faculties of memory, intellect, and will converge). Nevertheless, Augustine says that, though the mind cannot be identified with God, God most certainly rules over it and dwells within it, or as he also says in his *Exposition on the Psalms*: ‘God can be seen only with the mind, but he cannot be seen as the mind itself can be seen’ (*Exposition on the Psalms* 41.7; Boulding 2000: 245). In other words, though God is in the *memoria*, he also transcends it. Consequently, Augustine concludes his search in the *Confessions* with the insight that God can only be found *in God*: ‘Where then could I have found you in order to learn of you, if not in yourself, far above me?’ (*Confessions* 10.26.37; Boulding 1997: 261).

Finally, it is in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* that we find the most elaborate and systematic exposition on the nature of the *imago Dei*. Augustine presents a new understanding of image in which the human person is now not made solely in the image of Christ, but images all three divine Persons. The human person is thus fundamentally a Trinitarian being, and it is the unity and distinction of the three aforementioned faculties—memory, intellect, and will unified in the mind—that people image the triune God. In books 9–15 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine explores how it is in the operation of these faculties as self-consciousness, self-knowledge, and self-love that the human mind can transcend itself and participate in the life of the Persons in whose image these faculties were created.

In other words, Augustine contributed to the tradition a distinctly Trinitarian understanding of the *imago Dei*, which begins by distinguishing the human person from all other creatures because it has a spiritual mind, which in some sense is the very substance or foundation of the soul. As such, it is also the active principle of the spiritual faculties of the memory, will, and intellect. When these faculties operate towards spiritual things, they are oriented to the mind itself and thus to its origin, God, who both dwells within it but also transcends it.

It has been argued that among many other crucial insights, Augustine's anthropology also bequeathed to posterity 'a problem which remains one of the most discussed of philosophical problems even now: that of the relationship between soul and body' (Pitour 2013: 546). As we have seen, many of the Fathers sought to identify the image of God with that part of humanity that differentiates it from animals, and therefore located the image exclusively in our spiritual nature. They thus almost inevitably fell into some form of substance dualism. It must be noted, however, that the Fathers do not all present 'disembodied' conceptions of the *imago Dei*. For example, in his polemical writings against the Gnostics, Irenaeus defended a Pauline tripartite anthropology (made up of body, soul, and spirit, cf. 1 Thess. 5: 23) and emphasized that the image of God must be located on all three levels: 'For by the hands of the Father, i.e., by the Son and the Spirit, Man is made after the Image of God: man, not a part of man. Now the soul and spirit may be part of man, but man they cannot be: the perfect man being a certain mingling and uniting of the soul . . . which mixture is blended also with that flesh, which is molded according to the Image of God' (*Against Heresies* 5.6; Keble 1872: 460). The descent of the Holy Spirit into our souls thus enables us to act in physically embodied ways in accordance with God's plan, of which the body is a constitutive part. For a fuller discussion on Irenaeus and the *imago Dei*, see Weinandy (2003).

Let us now turn to three authors—John of Fécamp, William of St Thierry, and John of Ruusbroec—in the medieval Christian tradition to explore some mystical-anthropological developments in the *imago Dei*. These authors have been selected not because their writings offer a permanent solution to our problem but because (i) they provide particularly lively contributions to some aspects of the questions addressed earlier and (ii) their voices have, for a variety of reasons, been relatively absent from the debate. Their reflections must not be considered to be contradictory in any way, but rather as mutually complementary. In other words, to quote Bernard of Clairvaux, they are *diversa sed non adversa*.

CONTINUATIO MEDIAEVALIS

John of Fécamp (d. 1079)

John, an eleventh-century mystic, Benedictine abbot, and monastic reformer, is a little-known author principally because his major theological works, and especially his

Confessio theologica, were attributed to a variety of other writers, mainly Augustine. In the second part of the *Confessio* we find a reflection on the mystery of the incarnation, and though this is not an investigation of creation in the *imago Dei* (which remains implicit), it is nevertheless profoundly relevant for our understanding of transformed human nature in light of Christ, and particularly in view of the last topic raised, namely our nature as embodied beings.

John begins by elaborating a traditional view of the hypostatic union in which Jesus does not absorb the divinity of the Word and Jesus' humanity is not absorbed in God:

I bless you Lord for the wonderful and ineffable conjunction of the divine and the human in the unity of the person, not so that the one is God and the other is man, but so that one and the same is God and man, man and God, and that your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ is both real, perfect God and real, perfect man. But though the Word was made flesh through a marvellous gift, neither of the two natures was changed into the other substance. (*Confessio* 2.5; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 126)

John further specifies here that the primary purpose of the incarnation is 'so that what was taken from our reality might ascend *into* God'. Our ascension into God fulfils Christ's prayer in the Gospel of John 17: 24, namely that 'they might behold the glory I had in you before the foundation of the world'. This movement elicits the question of how we will see the glory of God that precedes all creation, and herein lies the importance of the fact that Christ assumed a concrete, physical nature: 'Thus he assumed not an angelic but a human nature, and glorified it by the gift of his holy resurrection and immortality, raising it above all the heavens and all the choirs of angels, placing it at your right hand' (*Confessio* 2.6; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 128). In other words, the relevance of the incarnation and ascension of Christ is not primarily that Jesus' spiritual nature has been raised into the divine realm, but that his body has ascended *into* God.

On this basis, John elaborates the implications that the ascension has for all people. Indeed, according to him, the mission of Christ in his incarnation and thus also his ascension does not refer exclusively to the concrete, historically specific body of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, Christ incorporates all flesh in his own flesh, thus imparting kingship and glory to all people:

Herein lie all my hope and my trust. For every portion of us, all our blood and flesh is in the humanity of Christ. Where my portion reigns, I believe that I reign. Where my blood rules, I feel that I rule. Where my flesh is glorified, I know I am glorified. (*Confessio* 2.6; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 128)

In other words, Christ is for us not merely paradise regained, but he has also 'opened the door of heaven' (*Confessio* 2.14; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 141), granting us access to the divine life itself. To quote John again, Christ 'remains in the same nature of the flesh in which he was born and suffered, and in which he has also resurrected. Indeed, in him human nature has not been destroyed, but is glorified, and will remain with the divinity eternally' (*Confessio* 2.14; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 141). Our nature has thus been

brought into the most intimate contact with God in the body of Christ. It should be noted that this is evidently not an attempt to make abstraction of our bodies here and now by sublimating them into the heights of the divine realm. Rather, John's insights convey a sense that our historically constituted, embodied lives are animated and vivified within this eternal horizon.

John now anticipates two problems or possible misinterpretations. The first relates to the way sin excludes us from living in the glory that has been bestowed upon us. The second is a corollary of the first, namely that if sin prevents this communion here below, such communion can only possibly be realized as eschatological fulfilment. First, John is acutely aware of the limitations that sin places on human persons, and that it does indeed exclude them from this heavenly presence. At the same time, however, he is mindful of the fact that the incarnation occurred for precisely this reason, namely to reconcile sinful humanity to God:

Although I am a sinner, I do not doubt this communion of grace: and if sins prevent me, nature invites me; and if my wrongdoings exclude me, the communion of nature does not reject me. For the Lord is not so cruel that he would forget humanity and would not remember that in which he is clothed, so that that which he assumed for my sake would not invite me for that very reason. For the Lord is not so cruel that he would not love his flesh, his limbs, his viscera.

(*Confessio* 2.6; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 128)

Therefore, it is not despite sin but precisely to remedy its reality that the communion of nature with Christ has been established. And furthermore, this has happened here and now for each of us, as John continues: 'In the same God and our ... Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we are already resurrected, already reborn, with whom we have already co-ascended into heaven, with whom we sit in the heavens, our flesh loves us' (*Confessio* 2.6; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 128). There is thus no question of eschatological postponement here, for we are *already* in God, and the power of sin cannot overcome this factual reality.

Finally, according to John, communion with Christ is not exclusive to Christ, but in him we also have access to the Father, in the glory and the love that they share 'together in one spirit' (cf. Eph. 2: 18) for 'on the appointed day, he poured out the Holy Spirit [he had] promised into his adoptive children' (*Confessio* 2.14; Leclercq and Bonnes 1946: 141). John thus explicitly associates his earlier Christological reflections with the infusion of the Holy Spirit. As we read in the earlier passage, in the human body of Christ, humanity has been raised to the heights of God's right hand, but it is in the gift of the Holy Spirit that humanity is given the means to become one love with God. The oeuvre of William of St Thierry presents profound mystical-theological reflections on this spiritual ideal.

William of St Thierry (c.1075–1148)

Generally speaking, it is true to say that until the twentieth century, William of St Thierry, a figure who has now been 'rediscovered' and recognized as one of the most

penetrating and original of Christian mystical theologians, was almost entirely unknown on his own terms. This is principally due to the fact that his works were either unknown and unread, as in the case of his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, or because they were attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, as in the case of his *On Contemplating God, On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, and the *Golden Epistle*. Through their ascription to Bernard, William's original and influential contributions to the mystical tradition were fused with Bernard's own. It is also true, however, that the two abbots and friends share much in common, including with respect to our present concerns, and together they have been labelled as belonging to the 'voluntarist' *imago Dei* tradition (see *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 7 (1971): 1433; also see McGinn 1986 for a study of Bernard's place in this tradition). Nevertheless, William presents some new and daring insights with respect to *imago Dei* theology.

William's anthropology might properly be called a Trinitarian doctrine of *imago et similitudo Dei*, for both being created unto the image of God (Christ) and becoming like God, or in his terms 'becoming what God is' (the unitive love of the Holy Spirit) are of fundamental importance. Although William argues that sin has affected the image and has even rescinded altogether our likeness to God, they can be reformed and perfected by orienting oneself to God and entering into a progressive and transformative relationship with grace. To bring out some of the key aspects of his thought, we must first identify how William conceives of and distinguishes between the *imago* and the *similitudo* in order to see how the image is restored through the various stages that make one like God by becoming what he is.

As David Bell has shown, it is along Augustinian lines that William elaborates his doctrine of the image and its participation in God (Bell 1984: 89–124). Every image, and in the case of the soul William most often employs the Augustinian triad of memory, intellect, and will, is naturally oriented to and participates in its source. The natural openness of these higher faculties and their inclination or 'appetite' towards their origin can never be abolished by sin, but on the contrary are sustained by the creative activity of God who dwells in the soul. In his *Meditations*, William presents a striking reflection on the mutual indwelling of God and the soul: 'When you dwell in us, we are your heaven, most assuredly. Yet you are not yourself sustained by dwelling in us; no, *it is your sustaining that makes us a dwelling for you*. And you too are our heaven, to which we may ascend, and in which we may dwell. As I see it then our dwelling in you or yours in us is heaven for us' (*Meditations* 6.7; Lawson 1970: 128, my emphasis).

The human person, however unlike God she may be, would simply cease to exist if she were not already sustained in that existence by the indwelling of God. But the (hidden) presence of God that sustains and attracts the soul to itself obviously does not yet imply the fullness of human potential. Since the soul has been ensnared by sin, it wanders here below in the labyrinthine misery and mystery of the *regio dissimilitudinis*, the realm of unlikeness. It is only by deploying those properties that constitute our image character that we are able gradually to mature into what William, quoting Paul, calls 'the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ' (cf. Eph. 4: 13). As he says in the *Golden Epistle*: 'This is [our] whole perfection-resemblance to God. Not to wish to be perfect is to fall into sin. . . . For to this end alone were we created and do we live, to be like God; for we were

created in his image' (*Golden Epistle* 2.16.259; Berkeley 1971: 95, slightly modified). Or to quote Bernard McGinn, 'the way in which we come to regain the *similitudo* of resemblance to God in gradual and imperfect fashion during this life and perfectly in heaven is the whole content of William's mystical theology' (McGinn 1994: 231). The different ways in which William articulates the dynamics of this development are too complex to be treated comprehensively here, but some key elements will provide a flavour of the richness and profundity of William's thought.

Employing a tripartite movement first found in Origen, the *Golden Epistle* is structured according to the development of the human person from animal (*anima*) in *Epistola* 46–186, to rational (*animus*) in *Epistola* 195–248, to spiritual (*spiritus*) in *Epistola* 249–300. The first state is associated with the body, the second with the rational human soul, and the third with the joining of the human spirit to the Holy Spirit. The lives of animal souls are dominated by the senses and to the material things that are external to them. This state can either be turned entirely outward, away from God and towards the material world, or it can be directed towards God. In the latter case, which William calls simplicity, the will is 'fixed on God, not yet formed by reason so as to be love, and not enlightened so as to be charity, that is the delight of love' (*Golden Epistle* 1.13.49; Berkeley 1971: 28). In this simplistic animal state, one must be obedient above all in order to reform the disobedience that led it into the sin of Adam to begin with. To this end, William advocates ascetic practice, prayer, and meditation on the life of Christ. This lowest state is associated with a form of likeness that has no merit with God for it is purely natural, not willed, and consists in the fact that the soul is 'like' God in the sense that it carries out dissimilar operations in ordering and directing the body without ever being unlike itself. Likewise, God carries out dissimilar operations in creation without ever being unlike himself.

Progressing through meditation on the life of the Word incarnate, the soul gradually becomes increasingly interior, activating its higher faculties in the search for God. These faculties are united in the human mind or spirit, and as such they are the created image of God. As Augustine had taught, these capacities function properly when they are devoted to finding and possessing the only thing that transcends the human spirit, namely God. 'For it is by him and for him that the rational spirit was created, in order that its inclination might be toward him and that he should be its good. . . . It was created to his image and likeness, in order that as long as its life here lasts it may approach as nearly and as truly as possible to him' (*Golden Epistle* 2.5.208; Berkeley 1971: 81). Drawn by God and informed by grace, the intellect and the will must collaborate in discerning truth and virtue, and order all thought towards their origin. This movement is associated with a second type of likeness that is closer to God because it is freely willed, and consists in the desire to imitate and persevere in the Good.

William's emphasis on the necessary collaboration of the will and the intellect is brought out more clearly in his earlier work *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, in a series of paragraphs in which he first discusses five spiritual senses and compares them with the five bodily senses. The five physical senses, ordered from lowest to highest, are touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. These correspond to the five spiritual senses,

which are five types of love. In order of comparison they are: love of parents, love of fellow Christians, love of all people, love of enemies, and love of God. The highest spiritual sense, the love of God, is most interesting for our purposes here. William names the sight for seeing God 'charity', which is telling since William repeatedly refers to God as charity, and to charity as the fulfilment of the will of God. This single vision, charity, has two distinct eyes, reason and love. Reason is the active, searching property of the soul, which seeks to identify God but can only find him in what he is not. Love, on the other hand, is a passive property which submits in all things to what God is. William insists that one without the other can make no progress towards God and he thus forestalls any purely rationalistic or purely fideistic religious attitude. When reason and love interpenetrate, becoming rational love or loving reason, they make great strides in advancing towards God. This is the beginning of the spiritual life, which William discusses in the third part of the *Epistola aurea*.

William says that in the third and final likeness to God the soul is so much like God that it can no longer be called a likeness but 'unity of spirit' (for William's originality on the use of this expression from Ephesians 4: 3, see Sergent 2015). First, he summarizes the various aspects of love and likeness up to this point: '*Amor* is a strong inclination of the will toward God, *dilectio* is a clinging to him or a union with him; *caritas* is the enjoyment of him' (*Golden Epistle* 2.15.257; Berkeley 1971: 94, slightly modified). He then goes on to discuss *unitas spiritus*, the most perfect and holy state that a human person can attain in this life. This is the third likeness which, as William explains, is called unity of spirit because:

Not only does the Holy Spirit bring it about or incline a person's spirit to it, but because it is the Holy Spirit himself, the God who is Charity. He who is the love of the Father and the Son, their Unity, Sweetness, Good, Kiss, Embrace and whatever else they have in common in that supreme unity of truth and truth of unity, becomes for the person in regard to God in the manner appropriate to him what he [i.e. the Spirit] is for the Son in regard to the Father or for the Father in regard to the Son through unity of substance. The soul in its happiness finds itself standing in the midst of the Embrace and the Kiss of the Father and Son. The person is found worthy to become not God, but what God is, that is to say the person becomes through grace what God is by nature. (*Golden Epistle* 2.16.263; Berkeley 1971: 95–6)

The greatest likeness to God consists, therefore, in being deified and becoming what God is, i.e. love. God loves himself within the human person, which in turn can do nothing but love with the same love that is God. It is to this love, which in Middle Dutch is termed *minne*, that John of Ruusbroec devoted his entire theological career.

John of Ruusbroec (1293–1381)

Along with Hadewijch, John of Ruusbroec has long been considered the foremost representative of the Dutch mystical tradition, a tradition which, as Bernard McGinn points

out in Chapter 4 of this volume, is still relatively little known due to language restrictions. Although he belongs to the tradition of what McGinn has taught us to call ‘vernacular theology’, Ruusbroec draws on an enormous array of monastic, scholastic, and vernacular sources, in addition to the Bible, which is his primary inspiration.

Two quotations from two different works can introduce Ruusbroec’s doctrine of creation. Both are commentaries on the image and likeness of God, but they describe creation in three distinct ‘movements’. The first, from the *Seven Enclosures*, concerns our life in eternity. The second, from the *Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, concerns our life in time.

We live unmanifested and unborn in our origin, that is, in the fruitful nature of our heavenly Father; and in the Son we are being born, and known and chosen from all eternity; and in the gushing-forth of the Holy Spirit, we are eternally loved; we should be glad to hear that. We are continually born in the Son, and ceaselessly being born with the Son, and eternally remaining unborn in the Father.

(*The Seven Enclosures*; De Baere and Mertens 2014: i. 529, ll. 588–593)

Holy Scripture teaches us that God, the heavenly Father, has created all humans to His image and to His likeness. His image is his son, the eternal Wisdom of Himself. ‘Therein live all things’, says Saint John: ‘All that is made, was life in Him.’ And that life is nothing but the image of God, in which God has eternally known all things, and that is also the cause of all creatures. And thus this image, which is the Son of God, is eternal, before all createdness. And to this eternal image we are all made; for according to the noblest part of our soul, that is the ground of our higher faculties, there we are made a living eternal mirror of God, whereupon God has impressed His eternal image and wherein no other image can ever come.

(*A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*; De Baere and Mertens 2014: i. 562, ll. 844–54)

As the first quotation indicates, from eternity in the life of God, all life has corresponded to the pattern of the divine life: unborn unity in the fruitful nature of the Father and Sonship in the begetting of the Son from the Father (for more on Ruusbroec’s distinctive Trinitarian theology, see Chapters 20 and 24 in this volume). We thus ‘live’ in a supra-creational way in the eternity of God. And more importantly, Ruusbroec specifies that, from eternity, we have been known, chosen, and loved in the Son of God. This is not merely a point of logic, which seeks to explain that if there is such a thing as created reality it must already have existed as an idea in the mind of God before it was materially created. Such language is alien to Ruusbroec’s thought. On my reading, Ruusbroec seeks to transfigure the language and categories within which we think about our existence in order to make us see the world from God’s perspective, as eternally born, chosen, and loved in the dynamism of the Trinitarian processions.

In the second quotation, Ruusbroec presents a view that by now will seem more familiar, namely that our created nature is made *unto* the true and perfect image of God, the eternal Word. What is unusual in Ruusbroec’s account is that he emphasizes that the ground of our being is an eternal and perfect mirror of the image of God, and we thus bear a perfect imprint of the image of God within our created being. With respect to Ruusbroec’s terminology, it is important to note that he uses different words to refer to

the 'ground' of the soul, its deepest point from which all other human characteristics flow. He usually calls it the *wesen*, which in his terminology is not to be identified with a particular essence or a particular set of attributes, but simply 'being'; it refers to the fact that the human person 'is' as such. Because the image imprinted upon the 'ground' is the living Christ himself, it can never be distorted or disfigured, let alone broken by sin. Ruusbroec notes that this ground is not identical to the image of God, for then we would be the Word of God, which we are not, but we are nevertheless in an immediate and eternal relationship with the image because it is present within us and imprinted upon us.

In a long passage from *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec describes all the facets of the human person as a created being. He conceives of all people as naturally complex wholes in which three distinct unities can be identified: the unity of the human soul, the unity of the human spirit, and the unity of the human *wesen* in God.

We find a triple unity in all people naturally, and in good people also supernaturally. The first and the highest unity is in God; for all creatures hang in this unity with their being, life and subsistence; and if they should be cut off in this way from God, they would fall into nothingness and be annihilated. This unity is in us essentially by nature, whether we are good or evil, and it renders us neither holy nor blessed without our effort. We possess this unity in ourselves, and in fact, above ourselves, as a principle and support of our being and our life. A second union, or unity, is also in us by nature, that is, the unity of the higher faculties, where they take their natural origin as to their activity: in the unity of the spirit or of the mind. This is the same unity which is hanging in God, but in the latter instance we understand it as active, and in the former as essential. Nevertheless, the spirit is totally within each unity, according to the entirety of its substance. We possess this unity in ourselves, above sensory perception, and from it come memory and intellect and will and every faculty of spiritual activity.... The third unity which is in us by nature is the domain of the bodily faculties in the unity of the heart, the beginning and origin of bodily life. The soul possesses this unity in the body and in the natural vigor of the heart; and from it flow all bodily activity and the five senses.... And this is natural in all people.

(*The Spiritual Espousals*; De Baere and Mertens 2014: i. 171–2,
ll. b35–b58, slightly modified)

The first sentence of this quotation anticipates Ruusbroec's entire theological-anthropological programme, which in myriad ways throughout his works grapples with what we are by nature and how, by being 'good people', this nature is transformed supernaturally. It may be helpful, for the sake of clarity, to examine our natural constitution in reverse order. Each of the unities basically consists of an aspect or aspects of human life that are unified in a common source on different levels. The first dimension of our being is our tangible body, which consists in sense perception and physical activity. The common source of these activities is the heart. Although we would nowadays identify the brain as the animating force of the body and its senses, the principle is basically the same. The second and third dimensions are in fact one and the same, but are understood differently when viewed as active or viewed as essential. In the former case, our spiritual nature consists in the activities of the memory, intellect, and will.

Ruusbroec thus also employs the Augustinian triad to articulate the basic higher functions of the human person. Although they are distinct in their operations, these faculties find their animating source in what Ruusbroec calls the ‘unity of the spirit or of the mind’. Third, when viewed as essential, the unity of the mind is our simple, onefold ‘hanging’ in God, who is the ultimate source of each of these three unities. The fact that Ruusbroec identifies the active and essential unities of the spirit as one and the same has been called ‘the most remarkable element in Ruusbroec’s anthropology’ because it implies ‘that the essence of our created being is not a substance but a relation to God. Ruusbroec clearly states that the essential unity—the unity between our created being and our eternal life in God’s Image—is the same as the active unity (the ground of the faculties)’ (Van Nieuwenhove 2003: 119).

In the *Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, Ruusbroec provides a more detailed exploration of our natural relation to God in the *wesen* or the ‘ground of the faculties’, in which he specifies that this relation implies that we are naturally like God. As in the earlier quotation, this natural likeness to God is contrasted with our (potential) supernatural likeness to God.

The substance of our soul has three attributes that are one in nature. The first is unimagined essential bareness. Therewith we are like, and also united with the Father and his divine nature. The second attribute may be called the higher reason of the soul, that is: a mirror-like clarity. Therein we receive the Son of God, the eternal truth. In that clarity we are like him, but in the receiving we are one with him. The third attribute we call the spark of the soul, that is: the natural inward inclination of the soul toward its origin. Therein we receive the Holy Spirit, the love of God. In the inclining inward we are like the Holy Spirit; but in the receiving we become one spirit and one love with God... This likeness, together with the union, is in all of us by nature. But it is hidden to sinners.

(*A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*; De Baere and Mertens 2014: i. 563, ll. 883–96)

All people, from the gravest sinner to the holiest saint, possess within themselves a natural likeness and union to God that can never be lost. Even without grace or the gifts of God, we are already united with the Father, one with the Son and, through the Holy Spirit, one spirit and one love with them both. It may be said therefore that, for Ruusbroec, nothing is given by grace that was not already present in nature, though it was hidden through sin. Rather, grace consists in the gradual revelation of an already present reality. Ruusbroec thus presents an extremely positive natural anthropology in which all people are endowed by nature with inherent dignity and nobility. This should not blind us, however, to the fact that he emphasizes repeatedly that this natural condition has no merit with God for it is not freely willed by us. It is no more than (but also no less than) the result of being known, chosen, and loved from eternity, and being created unto the image and likeness of God. It does not yet imply that this love has become fully reciprocal and therefore perfect.

He calls the revelation of this hidden reality our ‘supernatural’ relationship with God, and it consists in allowing the fullness of our existence in God’s eternity to be revealed and realized in the concrete reality of our earthly life. This supernatural relationship,

which we might also call ‘conscious,’ ‘revealed,’ or ‘enlightened’ union occurs according to the same pattern of our natural creation: in the body, soul, and spirit, which hangs in God. By this Ruusbroec means that we are called to make manifest our natural dignity and nobility in our relationships with others, with ourselves, and with God through the cultivation of an active life of good works, an interior life of theological virtue, and a contemplative life of enjoyable rest in God. These three together form the ‘common life,’ the most perfect state that it is possible to attain.

CONCLUSION

We began this exploration of the *imago Dei* with a speech delivered to a pope, so it may be fitting to end likewise. On 10 October 2012, then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams addressed the Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops in Rome with the following words, which express concisely the central theological-anthropological principles we have explored:

To be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity; and that humanity is the perfect human ‘translation’ of the relationship of the eternal Son to the eternal Father, a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other. Thus the humanity we are growing into in the Spirit, the humanity that we seek to share with the world as the fruit of Christ’s redeeming work, is a *contemplative* humanity. . . . We could say that we begin to understand contemplation when we see God as the first contemplative, the eternal paradigm of that selfless attention to the Other that brings not death but life to the self. All contemplating of God presupposes God’s own absorbed and joyful knowing of himself and gazing upon himself in the trinitarian life.

To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow. And the face we need to show to our world is the face of a humanity in endless growth towards love, a humanity so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end to find our way more deeply into it, into the heart of the Trinitarian life. St Paul speaks (in 2 Cor. 3: 18) of how ‘with our unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord,’ we are transfigured with a greater and greater radiance. That is the face we seek to show to our fellow-human beings.

(Williams 2012)

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CHAPTER 15

SPIRITUAL ITINERARIES

BOYD TAYLOR COOLMAN

INTRODUCTION

THE sheer volume of publication on ‘spiritual journey’ and the glib ubiquity of the phrase in common parlance suggest a notion that is largely taken for granted in contemporary Western culture.¹ Narrowing the observation to explicitly Christian (and even post-Christian) culture merely accentuates the claim. Indeed, one could argue that the overarching Christian conception of the human, the essential Christian anthropology, is that of *homo viator*, the human as ‘pilgrim’, ‘wayfarer’, ‘on the way’. But the ease with which we assume that to be spiritual *simply is* to be on a journey, the apparent obviousness, even naturalness of this metaphor, obscures the fact that itinerancy is a contingent feature of our collective consciousness, a notion having a particular, ancient origin and subsequent history in Western culture.

The focus of this chapter is the complex and multidimensional notion of spiritual itinerancy that emerges in pre-modern Christianity (i.e. prior to 1600). There are two reasons for this scope: first, it is impossible to do more in the space allotted; second, the pre-modern understanding is foundational for modern (and post-modern) conceptions of spiritual itinerancy, since the latter everywhere presume the former, even when they depart from it.

The claim proffered is that pre-modern, spiritual or mystical itinerancy (the adjectives are here used interchangeably) in the Christian tradition emerges at the fruitful nexus of certain Judaeo-Christian assumptions about the world and its original, current,

¹ Indeed, though the editor of the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, Julia A. Lamm, rightly notes in her ‘Introduction’ (Lamm 2013: 13–14) that in ‘*mystical texts*’ a dominant theme ‘is that of a mystical journey complete with an itinerary’, the *Companion* does not offer an explicit treatment of this theme. Similarly, many entries in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Sheldrake 2005) unselfconsciously use the language of ‘spiritual journey’ in describing numerous aspects of the history of Christian spirituality, as if this notion simply were obviously and self-evidently the only and fundamental way to describe the spiritual life.

and final relationship with God, on one hand, and of certain strands of Graeco-Roman culture and philosophy, on the other. The confluence of these two religio-cultural streams forms the rich context for the basic notion of spiritual journey in the early and medieval periods of the Christian era. More precisely, this chapter argues that here mystical itinerancy tends to have one of two *aspects* (pre- or post-conversion), one of two *trajectories* (vertical-mystical or horizontal-historical), and one of two dominant *modes* (personal or communal). Most precisely, these different dimensions combine to form three basic models: (1) individual, vertical-mystical ascent to contemplation; (2) individual, horizontal-historical peregrination to conversion/sanctification; (3) communal pilgrimage to the kingdom/city of God.

JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN ITINERANCY

The basic framework for Christian itinerancy is the overarching, salvation-historical narrative that Christians find in scripture, both Old and New Testaments, with its constitutive three-part drama of creation, fall, and subsequent history of salvation. This sweeping narrative has several features, relevant to the theme of itinerancy, that emerge from the portion of salvation history recounted in scripture (in contrast to the post-scriptural eras).

In the Genesis account of primeval human history, the initial and apparently divinely intended situation is rather static. In Eden, God and humans enjoy an immediate and intimate communion. After the primal fall, however, two consequences follow: First, the expulsion from the Garden introduces a distance or space between God and humanity, symbolizing a relational separation. Second, human beings are on the move, and initially that movement is centrifugal, away from the Garden and away from God. Cain, perhaps the paradigmatic post-lapsarian human, is condemned to be a fugitive and a wanderer over the face of the earth. The consequence of the primordial sin is thus peregrination *ex Deo*, away from God.

As is apparent with the calling of Abraham, though, God's remedial strategy is to initiate a new and quite specific movement, whose goal is to overcome the relational distance between God and humanity. Curiously, perhaps, that journey is construed less as a return to Eden (literally, at least), and more as a journey to a new place, a place of not merely restored but perhaps of even greater divine-human intimacy—the land of promise. So, Abraham becomes the first and in many ways paradigmatic *homo viator*, no longer meandering in Cain-like aimlessness, but on a purposeful journey to God, a journey that implicates his (physical and spiritual) progeny too.

Generations later, but in narrative continuity, the role of Moses is to lead the Israelites in the resumption of the same journey, after their Egyptian sojourn, a journey that nonetheless has its own peregrinative features in the Sinai wilderness. Significantly, what began as an individual enterprise, and expanded to that of an extended family, has now become that of a whole people, a chosen race of Abraham's descendants. The

corporate journey motif returns again in the post-exilic period as the journey back to Jerusalem assumes centre stage for the Jewish people. In the Christian Old Testament, then, 'the two dominant narratives are journeys—the Exodus from Egypt into the promised land, and the exile of the Jews into Babylon and their return to Jerusalem' (Hamilton 2005: 294).

In the Second-Temple period, important new dimensions to the journey motif emerge with the advent of Jewish apocalyptic movements, intensely preoccupied 'with the meaning of history and its approaching end'. Here, drawing on other Old Testament figures as models, such as Enoch (Gen. 5: 24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2: 1–12), a notion of a 'heavenly journey' and corresponding 'ascending motif' emerges, where the individual soul ascends through seven (or three) planetary spheres (Greek) or through seven heavens (Jewish). These apocalyptic, other-worldly journeys and heavenly ascents, coupled with emerging assumptions about personal immortality, altered the sense of what salvation was, how it was arrived at, and transformed the notion of journey, by individualizing, spiritualizing, and 'verticalizing' it away from a temporo-spatial, geo-historical notion of journey (McGinn 1991: 11, 15; Mitchell 2013: 109–10).

Both the ancient Hebrew wayfarers on physical journeys to inner-worldly destinations as well as those journeying to heavenly realms will be prototypical for later spiritual itineraries, though their Christian anti-types will adopt and adapt them variously. This is already visible in the texts of the New Testament. In John's Gospel, Jesus calls himself the 'Way' to the Father (John 14: 6). In the Synoptic Gospels, the programmatic theme of Jesus' preaching, 'repent' and 'seek the Kingdom of God', implicitly introduced central fixtures of the Christian life as a spiritual journey involving (1) a moment of conversion (meaning a change in the direction of movement, a 'turning around') and (2) a new movement Godward, a quest for a new reality, conceived of as a place where intimacy with God is restored (even if the kingdom turns out to be 'within you'). The Synoptic parable of the Prodigal Son, which vividly portrayed the Old Testament pattern of (1) fall; (2) journey away from the Father; (3) conversion; and (4) journey back, became a paradigm for later notions of spiritual itinerary.

The New Testament programmatically interiorized and spiritualized the historical itineraries of the people of Israel in order to characterize the post-lapsarian existence of Christians, who as 'aliens and exiles' (1 Pet. 2: 11) seek to be 'at home with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5: 8), just as the Old Testament patriarchs 'were strangers and foreigners on the earth', clearly implying that they 'are seeking a homeland' (Heb. 11: 13–14). In the Acts of the Apostles, Christianity is called 'the way' (Acts 9: 2) and Christians are 'people of the way' (Acts 18: 25). The Apostle Paul compared his own Christian life to a race to be run (1 Cor. 9: 24) and a course to be successfully traversed (2 Tim. 4: 7), while his own mysterious experience of 'rapture' (2 Cor. 12: 4) could be seen as a kind of 'heavenly journey'. Finally, 1 John 2: 12–14 deployed a developmental model to speak of spiritual childhood, youth, and adulthood, which was later used to characterize different stages of a spiritual journey (Mitchell 2013: 113–14).

All this explains a common feature of Christian accounts of spiritual itinerancy, namely, that they all assume a primal break in the ideal relationship between humanity

and God, and a subsequent displacement or dislocation of humanity from God, the overcoming of which is the *raison d'être* for the spiritual journey. In short, '*homo viator's* quest [is] to transcend his physical, earth-bound condition, in a movement of return to, and restoration of, a lost *patria*—of a lost, ideal state of being, felicity, perception, and knowledge' (Tucker 2003: 54). In the broadest possible sense, all Christian itinerancy is both possible and necessary because a diastema now yawns between a present, less-than-ideal situation and a future restoration of an ideal state of affairs.

From all of this, certain assumptions emerge that set the stage for later Christian conceptions of spiritual itinerancy. First, salvation lies in a future state of affairs, towards which Christian existence is heading, and to arrive at which a journey is required. Second, Christian existence has in some fundamental way a structure, coherence, and intelligibility typical of narratives. Third, this journey involves not just human individuals, but also a human community, a community that is (at least potentially) universal in its ultimate (and retroactive) scope. Fourth, in the post-scriptural Christian traditions, the narrative and dramatic texture of the scriptural account of the journey to salvation acquires in various ways a paradigmatic status, for example, the figure of Abraham, the people of Israel, the Exodus sojourn, the desert wandering, exile and return, the Promised Land, the Prodigal Son, and the Kingdom of God.

ANCIENT GREEK ITINERANCY

A second influence on Christian itinerancy is the central place of journey in ancient Greek culture. Famously, Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*, narrates the arduous, obstacle-strewn journey of Odysseus (Ulysses in the Roman version) to his home at Ithaca after the fall of Troy. For later writers, both Christian and non-Christian, this epic tale became paradigmatic for the spiritual journey. 'In the narrative tradition of antiquity, the story of Ulysses' journey provides a natural interface with the Christian idea of pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*)' (Pépin 1982: 4). For,

the Fathers of the Church could beautifully interpret the heroic travels of Ulysses as a type of the Christian's journey through terrestrial life. Ulysses had himself tied to the mast so that he would not be lured to disaster by the songs of the Sirens. Similarly, the Christian stranger on earth, the *peregrinus*, could be said to travel through strange and awesome seas in a ship, which is the Church, affixed to the mast of the Cross, absorbing the sweet and far from meaningless Siren songs of the world, without being deflected from the right course. (Rahner 1963: 328 ff.)

Similarly, the third-century Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus, in his treatise, *On Beauty*, could invoke the figure of Odysseus, whose departure from and return to Ithaca he compares to the soul's procession and return from the realm of the forms, while the

fifth-century Proclus saw in Ithaca, 'that mystical port of the soul to which the poet brings back Ulysses after the long wanderings of his life, and to which we rather must return, that is, if we wish to be saved' (Proclus, *In Plat. Parmen.* 5, ed. Cousin, col. 1025, 33–7; Pépin 1982: 5 n. 15). Indeed, 'homeward journey to his native Ithaca has served as the focal point and ready vehicle of a steady tradition of Pythagorean, Neo-platonic, and Christian allegorical exegesis' (Tucker 2003: 54). By the fifth century, Christian exegetes had fully appropriated the Ulysses motif.

As is apparent, the Greek worldview also entailed an account of reality in which the present state is in some sense a displacement or dislocation from home, from the proper or ideal situation, the remedy to which is a journey back to the primordial place of departure. This made it amenable to Jewish and Christian appropriation: 'This [Platonic] journey of ascent, fall, and renewed ascent could readily be juxtaposed with biblical stories of the creation of human beings and their exile from paradise' (Hamilton 2005: 294). What the Greeks added, though, was the notion that the return journey occurred through various stages of moral and intellectual formation and preparation, which cultivated an increasing likeness to God—i.e. divinization—and which culminated in contemplation or vision of, even union with, God.

Perhaps the reason that Christianity found much to appropriate in Neoplatonism was that both worldviews construe the profound separation between God and humanity as a spiritual distance to be overcome by spiritual traversion. Once Christian thinkers turned away from an exclusively literal/exterior understanding of salvation (not a *this-worldly* Jerusalem, Promised Land, Temple, etc., but rather one 'not made by hands'), it was a short step to appropriate Neoplatonic ascent motifs into an account of spiritual or interior journey.

PRE-MODERN CHRISTIAN ITINERANCY

A pregnant and programmatic synthesis of these Jewish and Hellenistic traditions first occurred in the writings of the first-century Jewish thinker, Philo of Alexandria, who made a Platonizing allegory of Moses in his *Life of Moses*. In fact, it is arguably Philo who inaugurates a remarkably fruitful and influential synthesis of the Jewish and Greek itinerary traditions by finding in Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai a paradigm of an ascending journey towards mystical union with God. That Philo also found the path back to God to be mysteriously adumbrated in the literal texts of scripture, which could be drawn out by proper techniques of allegorical interpretation, paved the way for a long tradition of Christian spiritual interpretation in the service of deriving spiritual or mystical itineraries—'to show the soul its way home to God' (McGinn 1991: 36).

From its beginnings, Christianity drew deeply from these two streams to characterize Christian existence in this life as fundamentally that of itinerancy. 'The topoi of *xeniteia* and *peregrinatio*, of pilgrimage, of homelessness, of strangeness in this world, are among

the most widespread in early Christian ascetic literature, and not a few ascetics, monastic and otherwise, practiced it by voluntary and migratory exile from their fatherland' (Ladner 1967: 237). The second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* explains that '[Christians] reside in their own fatherlands, but as if they were non-citizens; they take part in all things as if they were citizens and suffer all things as if they were strangers; every foreign country is a fatherland to them and every fatherland is to them a foreign country . . . They dwell on earth, but they are citizens in heaven' (*Epistle to Diognetus* 5.5 and 9; Bihlmeyer 1924: 144; this tr. Ladner 1967: 236). The three different models will make varied and creative use of these materials.

JOURNEY AS ASCENT TO CONTEMPLATION/UNION

The first itinerary paradigm, labelled 'ascent to contemplation/union', can be summarily described thus: an ascending movement of the soul or spirit, proceeding through identifiable stages or steps, often keyed to allegorized scriptural figures, events, or circumstances, which movement prepares for and leads to some form of contemplation of, and/or union with God. Common to all the examples here, the ascent metaphor includes three other features: first, an individual rather than communal focus; second, a pronounced ahistorical orientation: this is not a movement through time, even if the progress through the stages does not occur instantaneously; third, a kind of realized eschatology namely what is experienced is a genuine participation in eternity, even if not yet fully. Three pre-modern moments illustrate this model well.

Late Antiquity

Early in the third century, Clement of Alexandria adapted the Ulysses motif to his construal of spiritual journey as an ascent to contemplation:

Sail past the song [of the Sirens]; it works death. Exert your will only, and you have overcome ruin; bound to the wood of the cross, thou shalt be freed from destruction: the word of God will be thy pilot, and the Holy Spirit will bring thee to anchor in the haven of heaven. Then shalt thou see my God, and be initiated into the sacred mysteries, and come to the fruition of those things which are laid up in heaven . . .

(Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 12; Roberts and Donaldson 1979: 106–7)

Similarly, Clement's successor, Origen of Alexandria, appropriated the wilderness wanderings of the ancient Israelites as they journeyed to the Promised Land as an elaborate allegory of successive stages of the Christian life (*Homily 27 on Numbers*). More influential was his allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, wherein the

Alexandrian set forth the spiritual life as a three-step progression of (1) moral purgation and affective reordering of the soul, enabling (2) intellectual insight/vision, culminating in (3) contemplation: 'when the soul has completed these studies, by means of which it is cleansed in all its actions and habits and is led to discriminate between natural things, it is competent to proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love' (Astell and Cavadini 2013: 28ff.). In effect, this mapped the essential mystical itinerary, 'a journey upward, an ascension—the notion that may well be taken as the main motif of his mysticism' (McGinn 1991: 115), which 'had great influence on many later mystics' (McGinn 1991: 114).

For present purposes, the most important early Greek representatives of this paradigm are Gregory of Nyssa and the anonymous author of the Dionysian Corpus. In his *Life of Moses*, following Origen's lead, Gregory allegorized the wilderness wandering of the Israelites as 'a symbol of the spiritual journey of the soul to God' (Malherbe and Ferguson 1978: 5). But Gregory's particular focus on Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai as a type of the spiritual ascent was extremely influential. For him, the Sinai ascent involved moral purification, intellectual illumination, and finally mystical union. This three-step programme passed into the late antique collection of writings called the Dionysian Corpus. For the pseudonymous Dionysius, all of created reality cascades forth from its source, reflecting and symbolizing its source, and as such is for the rational creature a ladder (*scala*) which can and must be traversed in order to return to that source, now understood as goal. In the *Dionysian Mystical Theology*, as with Gregory, Moses is depicted as ascending this ladder by this *triplex via* of purgation, illumination, and union.

When these early Eastern traditions pass into the Latin Middle Ages, via late antique monastic culture, the ascent to contemplative union model will be programmatically codified into the following three-stage framework: initial *moral* practice (*praxis*) and purgation, *intellectual* proficiency (*theōria*) and illumination, and lastly *mystical* perfection (*theologia*) and contemplative union (Sheldrake 2005: 388).

While the significance of Eastern writers, such as Origen and Gregory, for Christian conceptions of spiritual itinerancy is substantial, no other figure adopted this notion more profoundly or influentially than Augustine of Hippo (Pépin 1982: 13–14): 'Augustine uses the concept of *viator* (*via*) almost as frequently as that of *peregrinus* (*peregrinatio*), he contrasts both concepts with those of *perventor* or *possessor*, which designate the man who has received his eternal reward in heaven' (Ladner 1967: 236 n. 14).

Suppose we were travelers who could live happily only in our homeland, and because our absence made us unhappy we wished to put an end to our misery and return there... But if we were fascinated by the delights of the journey and the actual traveling, we would be perversely enjoying things that we should be using; and we would be reluctant to finish our journey quickly, being ensnared in the wrong kind of pleasure and estranged from the homeland whose pleasures could make us happy. So in this mortal life we are like travelers away from our Lord [2 Cor. 5: 6]: if we

wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy, we must use this world [cf. 1 Cor. 7: 31], not enjoy it...or, in other words, to derive spiritual and eternal value from corporeal and temporal things.

(Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 1.4.4; Green 1963: 9–10)

Here, all things are signs pointing the way for the human wayfarer to the only reality that is not a sign, namely, God. Augustinian itinerancy also emphasized the movements of the heart and the virtues of the moral life: 'let us consider this process of cleansing as a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland, though progress towards the one who is ever present is not made through space, but through integrity of purpose and character' (*On Christian Teaching* 1.10.10; Green 1963: 12–13). This sense of life as a journey pervades Augustine's corpus and more than any other ancient Christian writer he bequeathed to subsequent centuries a fundamental conception of post-lapsarian human existence as that of *homo viator*, as one of wayfaring, or as the medievals would later say simply, *in via*, 'on the way,' as not yet, but destined finally to be, *in patria*, 'at home'.

By the end of late antiquity, a distinctive worldview had insinuated itself deeply into the Christian culture of the Roman Empire, both East and West. Medieval Christianity would develop within a framework in which God was both source *and* goal, both beginning *and* end—in a biblical idiom, Alpha and Omega—of all created reality. Here, not just individuals, not even whole communities, peoples, or nations, but the entire cosmos, was on a journey to an ultimate destiny in God, to which it was oriented, though at which it had not yet arrived. All human history, accordingly, was in some sense 'middling', in between, and thus in transit. Put simply, in pre-modern Christianity, itinerancy was cosmic in scale and scope. For human persons, on this telling, every created thing is relativized in relation to God—quite literally, that is, everything relates to its source, that from which it came, but for the rational creature, the relation to the source orients the rational creature to God as end. Whether as Augustinian sign or Dionysian symbol, the cosmos is a way (*via*) to God for the wayfaring human person in her journey back to God. Thus, what has been called the 'sacramental universe' of the Middle Ages is part and parcel of this profound sense of itinerancy pervading all of reality—to be 'sacramental' here is not merely to point to something else; it's to point *the way* to that Someone who is the end of all.

Medieval Latin Tradition

This centrality of itinerancy in medieval religious culture is evinced by the fact that throughout the Middle Ages (both geographically and chronologically) writers across a spectrum of institutional locations (e.g. monastery, university) and theological styles (monastic, scholastic, vernacular) commonly contrasted this present life with the next by designating the former as *in via*, 'on the way,' and the latter as *in patria*, 'at home' or 'in the fatherland'. From early medieval penitential pilgrimage practices, to the courtly

love traditions, to crusading, to monastic and mendicant deployments of journey motifs, medieval religious culture is imbued with itinerancy—‘midway along the journey of our life’ (Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, Canto 1; Longfellow 1867: line 1).

Between the sixth and eighth centuries, Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks ‘revitalized the whole concept of penance by choosing *peregrinatio*, homelessness and exile, as one of their principal penitential and ascetic practices and by making it fructify in various missionary centers of western Europe’. This initiative seems to have run parallel to the ‘increasing popularity of pilgrimages to the foremost shrines of Christendom’ (Ladner 1967: 245; cf. Dietz 2005). Later, this pilgrimage movement coalesced with medieval chivalry ‘in the great pilgrimage in arms aimed at recapturing Jerusalem’, namely, the Crusades (Ladner 1967: 246). Perhaps most significant of all, ‘Benedictine, and especially Cistercian, monasticism re-interiorized the ascetic conception of *peregrinatio*’ (Ladner 1967: 247). Programmatically, the Prologue of the Rule of St Benedict (RB) situated the Benedictine mode of life as a spiritual journey accomplished through the work of obedience: ‘by the labor of obedience you may return (*redeas*) to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience you have receded (*recesseras*)’, and then elaborates:

See, in His loving kindness, the Lord shows us the way of life (*viam vitae*). Therefore, having our loins girt with faith and the performance of good works, let us follow his itinerary (*pergamus itinera eius*) under the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who hath called us to His kingdom (1 Thess. 2: 12). If we desire to dwell in the tabernacle of His kingdom, we can only arrive there (*pervenitur*) by running (*currendo*) in good works.

(Rule of St Benedict, Prologue; Doyle 2001: 3)

Here, ‘way of life’ (*via vitae*) means more than a method or programme, but has its etymological sense of a path or itinerary. Paradoxically, given its overarching goal, the opening chapter of the RB explicitly criticizes ‘false monks’ who refuse to be physically stationary in their monastic lives: ‘who keep going their whole life long from one province to another, staying three or four days at a time in different cells as guests. Always roving and never settled’ (RB 1; Doyle 2001: 7). By contrast, the RB urges exterior stability to facilitate interior itinerancy: ‘a “*peregrinatio in stabilitate*,” that is to say, of self-exile from the world in the monastery’ (Ladner 1967: 247).

This general sense of spiritual journey receives a vertical, ascending orientation in chapter 7 of the RB, through an appropriation of a biblical image destined to a long medieval legacy. Advocating the virtue of humility, the RB says this:

Brethren, if we wish to arrive at the highest point of humility and speedily to reach that heavenly exaltation to which we can only ascend by the humility of this present life, we must by our ever-ascending actions erect such a ladder as that which Jacob beheld in his dream by which the Angels appeared to him descending and ascending. This descent and ascent signifies nothing else than that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility. (RB 7; Doyle 2001: 21–2)

Here, then, the RB represents the monastic life as a spiritual journey involving 'a ladder of our ascending actions' (Sheldrake 2005: 389).

Even as traditional Benedictinism underwent reform and renewal in the twelfth century, this sense of the monastic life as a 'way of living', in which 'way' (*via*) is a journey or movement towards a goal, was not lost. Explicitly referring back to RB 7, the Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux, penned a treatise on the spiritual life, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, in which he laid out a twelfth-century version of a twelve-step programme of spiritual progress: twelve steps of pride, by which one descends into sin and vice; twelve steps of humility, by which one arrives at holiness.

The most sustained deployment of the spiritual journey motif in the twelfth century, though, pertains to the signature interest of the era, namely, the nature of human love. In the words of Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141): 'love is everything to you: it is your choice, it is your running, it is your arrival, it is your dwelling place, it is your beatitude. Therefore, love God, choose God, run, take hold, possess, enjoy' (*Praise of Charity* 6; Feiss 2011: 161–2). In this, Hugh, whose contemporaries dubbed him a 'second Augustine', channels his alter-ego's account of this present life as a 'road of the affections' (*via affectuum*) (*De doctrina Christiana* 1.17.16), by which the person journeys back to her heavenly homeland (*patria*): 'by means of charity (*per caritatem*) you choose the road, by means of charity you run on the road, [and] by means of charity you arrive at your native land (*patriam*)' (*Praise of Charity* 8; Feiss 2011: 162). The century witnessed an explosion of interest in love, in its diverse expressions and manifold experiences. Numerous authors in various contexts analysed with exquisite precision the various degrees, steps, stages of the journey by which human love emerges, develops, flourishes, and finds its fulfilment in God. The very assumption that love is not a spontaneous feeling that is simply present or absent, but is rather susceptible to cultivation through gradual, ordered processes, reflects the profound itinerant conception of reality.

This focus on love is especially evident in two particular spiritual traditions that are distinctive features of the twelfth-century religious landscape, namely, the Victorines and the Cistercians.

In his famous and influential *On Loving God*, Bernard of Clairvaux identified four stages in the soul's journey to the fullness of love. The first is 'bodily love, by which man loves himself for his own sake'. While literally self-centred, this self-love is the natural and appropriate instinct—'innate in nature'—towards self-preservation. It can, however, exceed the pursuit of basic needs and overflow 'on all sides into the fields of pleasure'. The prescribed check on excess is the dominical injunction to love one's neighbour as one's self, in which the soul begins to recognize the same physical needs in others as in itself, which begins to reorient the soul away from itself: 'It is in this way that bodily love is shared, when it is extended to the community' (*On Loving God* 8.23; Evans 1987: 192). 'This is righteousness, to share what is common to our nature with him who as the same gift of nature' (8.24; Evans 1987: 193). In this shared pursuit of bodily goods, though, the soul begins to realize that the source of all good bodily things is in fact God it: 'learns from frequent experience' that God provides for bodily needs, and so 'begins to love God for his own benefit' (8.25; Evans 1987: 193). This is the second stage of the

journey: to love God for a cause, namely, for the good things that God provides. Repeated reception of such goods, though, gradually reveals the goodness of the source itself: 'to taste by frequent contact, and to discover by tasting how sweet the Lord is' (Ps. 33: 9). So, the one who loves God, 'not because God is good to him, but simply because God is good, truly loves God for God's sake' (9.26; Evans 1987: 194)—the third stage. This might seem to be the journey's end. Indeed, Bernard waxes rhapsodic on this experience of loving God for God's sake: 'the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself... throws itself wholly on God and, clinging to God (1 Cor. 6: 27), becomes one with him in spirit'. For 'to lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself (Phil. 2: 7) and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly not to human love' (9.27; Evans 1987: 195). Yet, this love is so transformative that the soul now undergoes a complete affective identification with God: desires and loves what and as God desires and loves—'such that everything it feels is divine'. In this, the fourth degree, the soul loves itself, and indeed everything else, only for God's sake: 'To love in this way is to become like God', namely, 'that as God himself willed that everything should be for himself, so we too will that nothing, not even ourselves, may be or have been except for him, that is, according to his will, not ours'. What brings delight now is 'the sight of his will being fulfilled in us and in everything' (9.28; Evans 1987: 195–6).

Only decades later, Richard of St Victor offered a similar itinerary in his provocatively titled *Four Degrees of Violent Love* (c.1170). In the first degree, 'wounding love', the soul thirsts for God, and in some measure experiences a taste of the divine, though God remains hidden from sight (*Four Degrees of Violent Love* 30–3; Feiss 2011: 288–9). Such 'teasing tastes' (Feiss 2011: 266) encourage moral reform, in order to receive more. Next, 'binding love' thirsts towards God. Here, the soul begins, in a way, to gaze upon God, or at least truths pertaining to God, through the mediation of images or even concepts. Though satisfying, the soul desires to experience God directly, in an unmediated fashion. In the third, 'languishing love', the soul thirsts into God, which consists in experiencing unmediated union with God (38–43; Feiss 2011: 291–4). Here, the soul is 'snatched away into the abyss of divine light [and] passes entirely into its God' (38; Feiss 2011: 291). Like iron in a furnace, the soul here is liquefied by the fire of divine love and experiences an affective union with God. Made malleable in its love, the soul can now only desire or will that which the divine impels it to desire or will. In the fourth degree, finally, 'weakening love' thirsts in accordance with God (28; Feiss 2011: 287). Since the experience of union is necessarily ephemeral, the fourth degree, as with Bernard's fourth stage, entails now a kind of descent 'back' and 'down' into ordinary modes of relations within one's community. But now, affectively conformed to the divine will, the soul, Christ-like, desires not special experiences for itself, but thirsts only for the salvation of its neighbours.

A century after St Bernard and the sea-change in religious life inaugurated by the rise of the Franciscan and Dominican religious orders, the journey motif remained vital: 'St Francis and the first companions of his order began as wandering hermits, and in his Third Rule the saint of Assisi still saw the members of his foundation as *peregrini*

et advenae, as strangers and pilgrims' (Ladner 1967: 246; cf. Cusato 2013: 313ff.). While the just-noted examples stressed an affective journey to union with God and neighbour, another medieval itinerary of ascent-to-contemplation/union included a profound dimension of intellectual meditation, namely, the Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey into God* (*Itinerarium mentis ad deum*). In a tradition of 'meditative ascents', whose precedents include Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* (McMahon 2006: 159–266), the *Itinerarium* also drew on the Dionysian *Mystical Theology*. It begins with a twofold meditation on the visible vestiges of God in the external world, turns inward to introspect the image and likeness of God stamped upon the soul, and then turns upward to contemplate God's very being and goodness, above the soul. The entire movement—six steps in all—terminates in an ecstatic *transitus* outside the soul itself—'beyond the mind'—into loving union with God—the intellective ultimately assimilated to the affective: 'the six levels of illumination, by which the soul, as if taking steps or journeys (*quasi quibusdam gradibus vel itineribus disponitur*), passes over into peace through an ecstatic excess of Christian wisdom' (*The Soul's Journey into God* Prol. 3; Boehner 1956: 35). In a striking synthesis of philosophical speculation on the visible world, along with both Old Testament accounts of temporal peregrination in the wilderness and the ascension of Christ in the New Testament—all assimilated to the scriptural symbol of Jacob's ladder—Bonaventure captures the complex medieval notion of the mystical journey: In order 'to ascend . . . Jacob's ladder, let us situate the first step at the bottom, by considering that we perceive this entire world as being a mirror. Through this, we pass into God, the supreme creator, as true Hebrews, passing over from Egypt into the land . . . promised to our ancestors, as Christians, passing over with Christ from this world to the Father' (*The Soul's Journey into God* 1.9; Boehner 1956: 45).

Early Modern Spanish Mystics

The final representatives of the ascent to contemplation model of spiritual itinerancy are the well-known mystical writers of the sixteenth-century Catholic Reform in Spain: Ignatius of Loyola, St Teresa of Avila, and St John of the Cross. St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* organize a spiritual itinerary into four 'weeks' of practices by which the participant arrives at an intended goal in the spiritual life. Significantly, these four weeks correspond to the three stages of the ancient 'threefold way' that have been noted: purgation, illumination, union (Ganss 1991: 51–3). More famously, St Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* creatively synthesizes older traditions of the soul's mystical ascent with the 'structural' intuition of the soul as a 'castle', whose seven 'mansions' are to be traversed in a seven-stage itinerary. As with Ignatius, this journey is organized around the traditional 'threefold way', though unlike Ignatius Teresa appropriates the traditional nuptial paradigm, by positing 'spiritual marriage' between the soul and Christ as the climax of the journey. Similarly 'journey' language

pervades *The Way of Perfection*, where she outlines the ‘Divine journey, which is the royal road to Heaven’ (Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* 21; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1976–85: ii. 117). St John of the Cross’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is a ten-step journey of ascent, climbing a ladder of love, progressing from bodily concerns to union with God, and famously passing through a ‘dark night of the soul’, to the summit of transformative and nuptial union—in short, a journey to the transforming union with God in love (Howells 2013: 430ff.). Lastly, St Robert Bellarmine penned a devotional meditation on the presence of God in creation titled, *The Mind’s Ascent to God by the Ladder of Created Things* (c.1614), explicitly invoking Bonaventure’s work as his inspiration. Intriguingly, while ‘most ladders [of ascent]’, like *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (John Climacus), *The Soul’s Journey* (Bonaventure), and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (John of the Cross), ‘deal with the ascent of the soul through various levels of the person’s development . . . in the spiritual life as a whole’—that is, they chart spiritual journeys—this aspect is strikingly muted in Bellarmine’s meditation. For ‘he substitutes the image of an ascent for that of a journey’ and the mystical *transitus* of the soul into God with which Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium* terminates ‘has no parallel in Bellarmine’ (Donnelly 1988: 27–33).

JOURNEY AS DESCENT TO CONVERSION AND PEREGRINATION TOWARDS HOLINESS/SANCTIFICATION

As noted at the outset, a basic assumption underwriting the journey motif in Christianity is that fallen humans find themselves moving away and so separated from God by virtue of their sinfulness and its implications for divine–human intimacy. Accordingly, any spiritual journey to God requires a change in the direction of movement, some sort of ‘pivot’ by which the sinner ‘turns back’ towards God. In short, a conversion is required. This conversion, moreover, fundamentally alters the individual’s relationship to God, affecting the individual’s stance or posture vis-à-vis God—from fugitive to follower, from foe to friend.

Two New Testament episodes became paradigmatic in later Christian tradition for a model of spiritual journey that focused on the journey leading up to a climactic and trajectory-altering, life-changing, movement of conversion. In Luke’s Gospel, the parable of the so-called ‘Prodigal Son’ involves a son who leaves his father’s home, inheritance in hand, only to squander it in dissolute living and to find himself destitute in squalor. Realizing his error, he returns in repentance to his father, who mercifully receives him back into communion. Second, the Acts of the Apostles recounts the Apostle Paul’s dramatic conversion as he is on a journey from Jerusalem to Damascus in order to persecute Christians there.

Early Latin Tradition: Augustine's *Confessions*

Certainly, Augustine's broad understanding of the human return to God is another instance of the ascent-to-contemplation model. But in *Confessions*, he introduced an original and autobiographical dimension to spiritual itinerancy and so inaugurated a distinct tradition thereof. For, even though the autobiographical narrative ends in book 9, with an account of his post-conversion experience of (brief and fleeting) contemplative union, in the company of his mother Monica at Ostia, this is essentially an epilogue or postscript to the elaborated journey *to conversion*, which journey is clearly the central focus and arguably the *raison d'être* of the entire work. With *Confessions*, then, Augustine produces another model of spiritual itinerancy that privileges the portion of the journey leading up to the climactic 'pivot', the moment at which the direction of human movement turns Godward, rather than all that might follow from it. This focus on the dramatic movement and resolution of the pre-conversion narrative is the signature feature of the second itinerancy model.

The multivalent literary artistry of Augustine's account of his journey to conversion defies easy summary. But several features are noteworthy here. First, Augustine artfully weaves together the classical Odysseus/Aeneas motif and the biblical prodigal son templates (O'Connell 1993: 174–9). At the same time, the narrative is highly autobiographical and explicitly personal; rather than sublimate himself to a biblical or classical figure (as did the Eastern writers already surveyed), Augustine unabashedly narrates his own spiritual journey. Not only that, but Augustine accentuates the interior drama of the story; the narrative turns on the psychological states of his mind and heart. And, though he describes both intellectual and moral barriers to conversion, arguably the accent falls on the moral. What is needed is a new will, a new heart, new love, new affections: the mystical life for Augustine is 'a journey for the affections' (McGinn 1991: 261). Augustine's journey also places new emphasis on the role of divine providence within the drama leading to conversion. In some sense, the narrative drama hinges on the intricate interaction between divine grace and human will. Lastly, though the journey is highly personal, it is scarcely private. No flight of the alone (Plotinus), Augustine's journey is profoundly shaped by the company he keeps throughout.

In Augustine's broad theory of the spiritual life, the pivot of conversion sets the stage for the return and ascent to union with God. But his mature theological reflections seem increasingly pessimistic about post-conversion success in this regard. Consequently, the entire spiritual journey of this present life is seen as ongoing conversion or the maintenance of conversion. Over the course of his life, Augustine came to an 'ever-increasing emphasis on the notion of progress (*proficere, proficiens*). Thus the Christian life is a pilgrimage, demanding on-going conversion... "if you say you've finished, you're finished"' (*Sermons* 169.18) (Martin 2005: 138). A sense of the necessity of constant progress 'is one of the most typical notes of Augustine's spiritual teaching' (McGinn 1991: 261).

Medieval Latin Tradition: Dante

Perhaps the most famous medieval itinerary, Dante's *Commedia*, sits squarely within this second paradigm of journey to conversion. If 'the point of departure, as well as the goal, of Dante's spiritual itinerary deliberately recalls the experience of Augustine in the *Confessions*, then it may be that we are to regard Dante's entire spiritual autobiography as essentially Augustinian in structure' (Freccero 2000: 189–216). Dante's *Commedia* recounts a pilgrimage that begins with the pilgrim wandering and lost in a dark wood and culminates with the vision of God. The journey proceeds through three stages: Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, each with its own guide: Virgil, Beatrice, and St Bernard of Clairvaux. The dramatic focus of the *Commedia* is the Inferno, the first phase of the journey, filled with dramatic tension. So, like *Confessions*, the *Commedia* can be read as an ascent-to-contemplation journey; but also like *Confessions*, the most intensely journey-like portion is the first, the journey to conversion.

Importantly, in both *Confessions* and *Commedia*, the journey to conversion can be construed as a descent that precedes and enables any subsequent ascent. This makes a key theological point in the second model, namely, that the condition for embarking on the spiritual journey begins with an initial phase of journeying to painful self-knowledge and humble awareness of one's sin and one's concomitant impotence in the spiritual life. Dante's inferno, in the words of John Freccero:

is a limit situation, like the prison camp or the cancer ward, where all illusions are stripped away where one has no choice but to acknowledge one's powerlessness. The journey therefore is an allegory of education, like Plato's Myth of the Cave, except that all of hell must be traversed in order to reach the cave, point zero, from which Plato thought the journey began. This journey begins at a point minus one, an illusory world of inverted values, in which one lives with a false image of one's self. These illusions must be destroyed before any spiritual progress can be made. The descent into Hell is meant to be destructive, its irony corrosive, in order to clear the way for the ascent. (Freccero 1994: p. ix)

Dante's descent into hell 'dramatizes Augustine's mystic injunction: "Descend, so that you may ascend"' (Freccero 1994: p. ix).

A second and related point is the stress on the human dependence upon divine grace in the journey and the concomitant importance of human humility and the need for external assistance: The journey of Ulysses 'functions as an antitype of Dante's journey'. 'In the symbolic geography of the poem, Dante and Ulysses travel toward the same objective: the mountain of Purgatory', yet Ulysses suffers shipwreck (on Dante's telling, not in Virgil's!), while Dante succeeds. Why the difference? Ulysses represents autonomous human striving, without divine assistance, grace, and the guidance of others and thus no need for humility. 'Ulysses was the traditional emblem in antiquity of the soul's journey, without a guide, to its celestial home.' Ulysses' fate in the *Commedia* thus constitutes 'a palinode, a retrospective retraction' of 'proud

self-reliance'. For Dante, as for Augustine, 'any such journey, alone, was doomed to failure' (Freccero 1994: pp. xv–xvii).

So, the most emphasized phase (arguably) of Dante's journey, like Augustine's, is paradoxically a 'flight to the depths' (Freccero 1994: p. xvii). Dante's journey is 'different from other metaphoric flights to the absolute because of the presence of a guide—the ancient Neoplatonist Plotinus had specified that on the mind's journey to the One, no guide was necessary' (Freccero 1994: pp. xv–xvi). If this were all there were to the journey to God, Dante's elaborate poem (like Augustine's *Confessions*) would not have been necessary.

For Christians, however, intellectual enlightenment is not the same as virtue. Virtue requires an act of the will, so that one may do what reason tells us is the good. The three beasts that block the way are the beasts within us, dispositions toward sin that we cannot exorcise without supernatural help. The descent into Hell under Virgil's guidance is directed toward surmounting those obstacles and the *Purgatorio* tells a story of the successful climb. (Freccero 1994: pp. xv–xvi)

Early Modern: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*

Though the 'archetypal [journey] narrative has been the constant subject of writing and re-writing from Antiquity onwards, through the medieval period to the Renaissance (and beyond)' (Tucker 2003: 54), it is difficult to shake the impression that something significant changed in Christian conceptions of spiritual itinerancy after the Middle Ages, as the vague, parenthetic 'and beyond' in this quotation suggests. A recent anthology of mystical texts from the entire Christian tradition, in a section entitled 'Mystical Itineraries', lists no excerpts written after the fourteenth century (McGinn 2006). Though the matter is complex and resists simple schematization, it is arguable that, in the wake of the sixteenth-century religious upheavals in Europe, and the emergence of new theological principles and paradigms, the following changes occur. First, the second itinerancy model comes to the fore in the early modern period, whereas the first model was predominant in the early and medieval periods. At the same time, that second model witnesses some significant developments. While earlier versions of the second itinerancy model (like the first model) typically construed the journey within a largely vertical-mystical trajectory of descent-ascent to union with or contemplation of God, after the sixteenth century, by contrast, the second model tends to conceive of spiritual itinerancy more as a horizontal-historical peregrination and pilgrimage, often unique to the individual traveller and fraught with risk and danger, through which the pilgrim must travel safely to arrive at eternal salvation.

For the emerging Protestant traditions, it is crucial to note the impact on the notion of spiritual itinerary of certain theological principles, especially related to theories of salvation, emanating from the magisterial reformers, like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

Martin Luther's insistence on the radical distinction between justification and sanctification, with the former bearing the whole soteriological burden of the individual's

relationship to God, both in this life and the next (cf. Luther 1961: 63–5), dramatically undermined the soteriological significance of any post-conversion or post-justification movement (however understood) towards God. As Howells has noted, Luther's rejection of 'justification as a journey, through works and further grace, to a higher goal of perfection or union with God... had serious consequences for conceptions of Christian perfection'. For when 'the completion of Christian life (this side of heaven) is in the attainment of a single step of faith, the further step of mystical transformation into God is ruled out' (Howells 2012: 124). Within this framework, *homo viator* as conceived of in the first model ceased to be the most fundamental way to conceive of post-lapsarian human existence (Ozment 1971: 142–54). Nor did John Calvin's subsequent stronger insistence on the inseparability of justification and sanctification fundamentally alter this shift in theological anthropology and soteriology in his own thought, nor in that of many of the Calvinist traditions stemming from him.

In reacting to Protestant soteriologies, especially those of Luther, the official Roman Catholic response articulated in the Council of Trent's 'Decree on Justification' revalorized an itinerant soteriological framework programmatically articulated in the Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas. On this account, salvation was the terminus of a progressive movement of sanctification begun in this life, providentially initiated and guided by grace, while also requiring grace-enabled human cooperation. Rejecting Luther's distinction between justification and sanctification, in which eternal salvation was secured immediately in this life by saving faith, Trent's *Decree* stressed the absolute necessity of the continual itinerary in this life towards salvation in the next life. This journey involved the prevenient grace of initial conversion, greater and greater participation in the grace of Christ the Head, growth in actual (not imputed) righteousness through 'faith and works', increased possession of the virtues, and the 'gift of perseverance' (*Decree on Justification* 13; Schroeder 1978: 416–17), as well as the free cooperation of the human *viator* in her gradual movement toward the fullness of the next life (cf. *Decree on Justification* 10–11, 16). Even Catholic sacramental theology reflected this outlook in its characterization of the eucharist as not merely food but as *viaticum*—food for the journey and as foretaste of the eschatological banquet.

Moving beyond the sixteenth-century theological debates and into the early modern period, the final representative of the second itinerancy model is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, written in the late seventeenth century, 'without doubt, the most influential religious book ever written in the English language' (Witherspoon 1957: p. vi). Taken in its totality, *Pilgrim's Progress* is an account of the pilgrim's successful journey to heaven, in which salvation from perdition, rather than union with or contemplation of God is the primary goal. Perhaps reacting to a perceived excessive preoccupation with the magisterial teachings on predestination and justification by faith alone, the traditions of the radical reformation, especially the Puritanism represented by *Pilgrim's Progress*, articulated a view of the Christian life in terms of a spiritual journey, construed, both pre- and post-conversion, as the active pursuit of holiness: 'an intense focus on sanctification—the arduous journey whereby the believer was progressively purged of sin' (Como 2008: 249–50). Here, 'the Puritan imagination was especially responsive

to the narratives of the many...migrations through which God guides his chosen people Israel in the Old Testament and to the Bible's many metaphorical deployments...of wayfaring'. And 'the topography of the Puritan journey was established by biblical narratives of desert journeys' (Keeble 2008: 315–16). Here, the faithful are, in the language of Hebrews 11, 'nomadic "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" who "seek a country", "that is, an heavenly"' (Hebrews 11:13–16) one' (Owen 2003: p. xxvi). 'Puritans thought of themselves as "Outlandish-men" like Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair, that is, foreigners in transit' (Keeble 2008: 316). Not only that, but the journey is through 'a wilderness', 'beset by "dangers" and "travails"'; 'the narrator of *The Pilgrim's Progress* walks "through the wilderness of this world" and it was from the prison where "I stick between the Teeth of the Lions in the Wilderness" that Bunyan addressed the reader of *Grace Abounding*' (Keeble 2008: 315–16). The journey is fraught and perilous: 'Unlike Bunyan's complacently (and tragically) confident Ignorance, the true pilgrim is spiritually alert and morally engaged at all times: "Departing from iniquity", wrote Bunyan, "is not a work of an hour, or a day, or a week, or a month, or a year: But it's a work will last thee thy life time' (Keeble 2008: 317). 'This point was often made by associating with the figures of the journey and the pilgrimage the Pauline image of the race for the prize or crown of salvation (1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 5:7; Philippians 2:16; Hebrews 12:1)' (Keeble 2008: 317–18).

The Pilgrim's progress is arguably the early modern culmination of the second model of spiritual itinerancy that emerged with Augustine's *Confessions* and found medieval expression in Dante's *Commedia*. Whereas the earlier authors especially stressed the dramatic journey to conversion, Bunyan expands that phase of the journey to encompass the entire Christian existence in this life. In a sense, this spiritual journey is a lifelong process of ongoing conversion or the incessant pursuit of sanctification in route to eternal salvation.

JOURNEY AS COMMUNAL PEREGRINATION TO THE HEAVENLY CITY: PILGRIM 'PEOPLE OF GOD'

Though seemingly not as prevalent as the first two models, a third itinerancy model is apparent in the Christian traditions and merits brief mention here. In Augustine's *City of God*, the bishop of Hippo defines a city as a group of people joined together by their love of the same object. But since there are ultimately only two objects of love, either God or the self, there are in the end only two cities: the City of God, where all love God to the exclusion of self, and the City of Man, where self-interest makes every sinner an enemy to every other. Though a city is manifestly not a journey, in Augustine's account, the two cities are in fact two eternal destinations for human beings towards which they are travelling and thus the two cities are in fact two distinct spiritual itineraries with

distinct trajectories. At present, it is not apparent who is on which journey, but at the Last Judgment, the two kinds of citizens will be definitively separated and sent to their respective cities, Heaven or Hell. In this present life, then, this earthly city is well-characterized as 'an encampment in which saints and sinners meet and mingle as pilgrims en route to opposite destinations' (Freccero 1994: p. xvii).

To put the matter thus is to accentuate the communal nature of the spiritual journey in the Christian tradition, to shift the focus away from the individual itinerant and toward the community. For the City of God is precisely *not* merely a collectivity of all those individuals who have successfully traversed their own private spiritual journeys, assembled together at the finish line, so to speak. Rather, it is the community as such which is journeying to the City of God and the condition of membership therein is precisely a love that transcends (even rejects) a private love of self in favour of the love of the other, of the neighbours who are united by their love for God. The City of God is the community of those bound together in and by genuine love for God and one another.

Though the Second Vatican Council obviously falls well outside the chronology bounding this chapter, its definition of the church as the 'people of God' (*Lumen Gentium* 2), who are in this present life a 'pilgrim people' (*Lumen Gentium* 7), journeying together in time towards the Kingdom of God, is perhaps an appropriate concluding representation of this third model.

CONCLUSION

To speak of 'itineraries' is thus to invoke a notion whose roots reach deep into the soil of Western culture. From the journeys of the ancient Jewish patriarchs (e.g. Abraham and Jacob) and the Egyptian sojourn and wilderness wanderings of their descendants, to the peregrinations of Odysseus, to Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, to Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God*, to Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey into God*, to Dante's *Commedia*, to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, itinerancy is fundamental to Western, and especially Christian, conceptions of human nature and experience, both individual and communal.

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McGinn (1991); Ladner (1967); Sheldrake (2005).

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CHAPTER 16

DEPTH, GROUND, ABYSS

CHARLOTTE RADLER

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIAN mystics have used the topographical metaphors of depth, ground, and abyss to illuminate the continuity between God and creation. This chapter explores primary texts of seminal theologians to lay bare common meanings of these metaphors and to show where significant and innovative developments occur. I provide a brief survey of the biblical and early Christian usage of the metaphors; I then move to a more extensive examination of them in the writings of medieval, modern, and post-modern Christian thinkers Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, and Dorothee Sölle.

Though it is difficult to trace the genealogy of terms, the use of the metaphors depth, ground, and abyss as conceptually rendered spaces of divine and human nature as well as the process of union becomes more profuse in Christian mystical literature from the late Middle Ages onward. The proliferation of these terms harmonize well temporally, conceptually, and heuristically with what Bernard McGinn terms the ‘New Mysticism’, which marks a secularization of mysticism (McGinn 2001: 8). Dismantling a binarized logic of static identities and relationships, the New Mysticism is characterized by an ongoing conversation between clergy and laity, men and women, and Latin and vernacular culture. Emblematic of the New Mysticism is its bi- or multilingualism (Eckhart wrote both in Latin and the vernacular Middle High German), which creates a fertile climate for the reinterpretation and development of new concepts and metaphors. In his novel play with concepts, Eckhart translates and transfers them back and forth between languages, at the same time undercutting linguistic, conceptual, and spiritual dichotomies and stasis. Moreover, the New Mysticism places significant spiritual value on quotidian activities, thus democratizing mystical theology. The deconstructive and political implications of Eckhart’s expansion of the domains included in the metaphors ground, abyss, and depth continue to be appropriated and reworked in contemporary mysticism and spirituality as exhibited in the writings of Merton and Sölle. Merton’s and Sölle’s hewing of these metaphors manifest more recent concerns with fortified individualism,

extending, for Sölle, into the aggressively atomistic and dualistic Cold War life world as well as the beginning of the post-9/11 era.

REDRAWING COORDINATES: ABYSS, GROUND, AND DEPTH IN BIBLICAL AND EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Abyss, ground, and depth are all spatial and physical metaphors. Yet, in several mystical texts, including the writings of Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle, they are used to stretch the continuum of God and human, time and eternity, immanence and transcendence. They challenge static identities and relationships. While it is a human inclination to impose boundaries and mark off territory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 29–30), mystical topographical discourse redraws space and time. Metaphors, which are ‘systematic devices for further defining a concept and for changing its range of applicability’, marshal a new understanding of our experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 125). While the application of these metaphors may introduce incongruity, they serve to structure embodied experiences in terms of domains (metaphorical mappings) that render the discourse coherent and meaningful (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 81, 83, 85, 117, 119–20, 184, 230, 246–7). Undercutting an objectivist view of metaphor as simply a matter of linguistic expression, here metaphor structures our conceptual systems and transforms our life worlds. The exploration of these mystical metaphors is significant because metaphor has the power to trigger new conceptual realities which provide a lens for discerning experiences and living life, thus reinforcing the influence of the metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 145).

In terms of etymology, the metaphor ‘abyss’ derives from the Greek word *abyssos*, which, through its alpha privativum, designates the lack of a bottom and, hence, cessation. *Abyssos* paints a vertiginous picture of bottomless infinitude and unfathomable depth. In the Old (Septuagint) and New Testaments, abyss can be applied to both the terrestrial and aquatic. In Genesis 1: 2, the metaphor of abyss signifies the primordial floods or the surging watery depths of God’s unfinished creation. In its hydrographic connotation, abyss describes the deep sea (Jonah 2: 6; Job 28: 14, 38: 16, 41: 23) and subterranean waters (Gen. 7: 11, 8: 2; Ps. 78: 15, 18: 7; Prov. 3: 20, 8: 24). At times, it simply means depth (Gen. 30: 8; Job 41: 23; Ps. 32: 7, 76: 17; Isa. 44: 27, 52: 10). As we will see in later writings, depth is frequently used as a synonym for or added emphasis to abyss and ground. In some contexts, the concept of abyss also portends hell, a place of incarceration of spirits in the underworld or the nether-worldly location of demons and Satan (Ps. 71: 20; Amos 7: 4; Luke 8: 31; Rev. 9: 1, 2, 11, 11: 7, 17: 8, 18, 20: 1, 3) and the realm of the dead (Rom. 10: 7; Ps. 106: 26) (Kittel 1964: 9; Freedman 1992: 49; Danker 2000: 2). For the mystics whom I will discuss, the abyss symbolizes a union with God, which thrusts the soul into a free-fall that allows it to plunge into God and into oneness.

In the Bible and early Christian literature, 'ground' tends to have earthy connotations, referring to land or surface but also, in some cases, to origin. Ground, additionally, signifies abyss and hell. The word ground derives from the Germanic term *grunt* or *grund*, conveying bottom and foundation but also reason, source, and cause. It is significant to note the close etymological bond between ground (*grunt*) and abyss (*abgrunt*) in the Germanic languages with the 'ab-' functioning similarly to the alpha privativum in Greek and, hence, connoting endlessness and the lack of a firm bottom. Finally, in ways that highlight the intersection of the three terms, depth emerges from the German concept *tiof* or *tief* and communicates a sense of deepness and foundation. The metaphor of depth has both spatial and connotative meanings. Our thinkers employ these metaphors to redraw the coordinates of the relationship between God and the human being and the broader world.

In early Christian literature, writers often enter the discourse on abyss, ground, and depth from a biblical-exegetical place, whereas in the writings of Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle, creative metaphorical connotations outweigh the more directly biblical-exegetical readings. Basil of Caesarea (330–79) stays close to the biblical language of abyss as the dark, horrible abyss of Hades (*pythmē aidou*), where punishment is administered unsparingly, moaning and wailing is heard, and horrors are without end (Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 46; Deferrari 1926: 304–5). When discussing the notion of abyss (*abyssus*) in the *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) frequently lingers around the creation story in Genesis 1: 20–2. In wonderment, he extols God for creating all there is from the dark, unstructured 'almost-nothingness' of the abyss and ponders different theological interpretations of the verses (Augustine, *Confessions* 7.8; Hammond 2014: 270–1; see also 7.21; 12.3; 12.12–13; 13.5–6). In 12.25, Augustine amends his reading of Genesis 1: 20–2 by employing Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic lenses. He contends that the allusion to the unstructured abyss is to the creation of unformed physical matter, while the shadows over the abyss imply the unrestrained flow of spiritual matter (*Confessions* 12.25; Hammond 2014: 296–7). In book 8, he applies the metaphor to the pre-converted, sinful landscape of the self, which contrasts with the light of conversion; nevertheless, the converted person always remains a convalescent with an infirm gait ready to relapse in this life (*Confessions* 8.2; Hammond 2014: 340–1; also 13.14; 13.30; and 13.7). Depicting absolute human dependence on God, with whom he engages in an extensive conversation throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine inserts references to Psalm 130: 3, exhorting God to hear his soul crying from the depth (*profundum*) of the abyss (*Confessions* 9.3; Hammond 2014: 194–5).

Early Christian thinkers often adopt the metaphor of ground in quite a literal sense, imputing the meaning of the ground on which we stand (field, land, soil, or earth). Ground is also frequently imbedded in narratives about concrete situations and dilemmas—rather different from what we will find in Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle, where the metaphor proffers a mystical-theological meaning. (Examples of the more literal sense are numerous: Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 6, 44, 58; Deferrari 1926: 40–1,

270–1, 358–9; *Letters* 231; Deferrari 1930: 360–1 [gē]. Boethius (480–524), *Consolation of Philosophy*; Stewart et al. 1973: 230–1, 346–7, 386–9, 420–1 [area, campus, arvum, humus, vicina]. Bede (672–735), *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, tr. King (1930): 22–3, 30–1, 68–9, 116–17, 172–5, 190–1, 200–1, 220–1, 290–1, 386–7 [terra, motus, tumulus].)

In the early Christian writings, depth is positioned to punctuate concrete meanings as well as a more conceptual sense. In Basil of Caesarea's writings, depth (*bāthos*) encompasses the depth of the self and one's character ('depth of heart', 'depth of hypocrisy', the 'depth of iniquity') and the depth of God's wisdom (Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 44; Deferrari 1926: 272–3; 130; Deferrari 1928: 292–3; 223, 244; Deferrari 1930: 286–7, 468–9; 272; Deferrari and McGuire 1934: 146–7). The concept in its non-literal modulation is capacious enough to embrace both Christ and the human being. In his *City of God*, Augustine employs depth to connote the depth of ignorance or misery that resulted in the first sin of humankind (Augustine, *City of God* 22.22; Greene 1972: 304–5; 18.35; Sanford 1965: 502–3 [*profundum*, *profundis*]). When exploring the topographical parameters of the human heart, Augustine abides by the nomenclature of *profundum* or *profundis* (*City of God* 18.32; Sanford 1965: 484–7; 20.8; Greene 1960: 298–9).

It is important to note that we cannot locate a rupture between the biblical and early Christian writings, on the one hand, and the medieval, modern, and post-modern writings, on the other hand. Rather, we can detect an expansive and creative recouping of the metaphors in our later authors. However, biblical and early Christian uses of abyss, ground, and depth are more concrete and biblical-exegetical, and the ontological and unitive implications more circumscribed than in the later writings of Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle.

LIVING OUT OF THE GROUND: ONE SEEING, ONE KNOWING, AND ONE LOVING IN THE MYSTICISM OF MEISTER ECKHART

The Dominican Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1328) is one of the most influential and controversial mystics in Christian history (tenets of his thoughts were condemned posthumously). He appropriates the notions of ground, abyss, and depths in innovative ways, which lay a foundation for a more daring theo-metaphorical understanding from the late Middle Ages onwards. While always pointing back to scripture and the preceding theological and philosophical traditions, Eckhart's roaming of the space between representation and experience moves away from a more literal and physical construction of the terms. Eckhart manifests Lakoff's and Johnson's argument that we function in terms of metaphors: '[M]etaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (Lakoff and

Johnson 1980: 3). Eckhart's writings constitute the keystone for my discussion and for the succeeding adaptation of these symbols.

Eckhart develops a 'mysticism of the ground' (*grunt*) which came to shape the ensuing Dominican mysticism of the fourteenth century (e.g. Johannes Tauler and Henry Suso). Ground is what McGinn identifies as a 'master metaphor' or 'explosive metaphor', for it possesses an 'organizing power' and 'breaks through previous categories of mystical speech to create new ways of presenting a direct encounter with God' (McGinn 2005: 38). The metaphor transforms 'ordinary forms of consciousness through the process of making the inner meaning of the metaphor one's own in everyday living' (McGinn 2005: 84).

In developing his mysticism of the ground, Eckhart posits a limitless, uncreated ground of the soul that coincides with God's boundless ground; here, God resides and the soul resides in God, giving the soul, Eckhart says, more width than the sky or anything imaginable (Pr. 42, DW 2; Quint 1971: 301–2—I refer to the Latin Works as LW and the Middle High German works as DW; all translations are my own). Ground symbolizes the inexpressible placeless place where God and soul are One without distinction through detachment, but also 'whence' creation pours forth. Additionally, it conveys the eternal divine spark in the soul. Ground, further, comes to signify a this-worldly mysticism and a living, integrated union between action and contemplation. The linguistically related metaphor 'abyss' (*abgrunt*) similarly connotes the deepest profundity of the human being and the divine in their mutual transcendent nothingness. Although containing sliding shades of meaning, abyss expresses the dynamic identity between God and the soul, especially as the perfectly detached soul assumes the identity of the Son and unites with God. The term abyss helps picture the practice of de-ontologizing insofar as the human being is identified with a static identity; in the abyss, the human being has an identity without identity. Abyss, however, does not add to the sense of creative efflux provided by ground. Eckhart mainly integrates the notion of 'depth' (*tiof* or *tief*) in his mysticism in conjunction with ground and abyss.

As a mystical cartographer, Eckhart maps a space in which humanity and divinity flow continuously in and out of one another, thus obviating the dichotomy between creation and Creator and surmounting displacement and temporality. According to his so-called metaphysics of flow, in eternity the ground of the Godhead boils into the Trinity, which in time overflows into creation; creation is, thus, both One and Trinitarian in structure as well as eternal and temporal. Eckhart views creation as firmly grounded in the Trinity and the Godhead (*Expositio Libri Exodi*, LW 2; Koch and Fischer 1954: n. 16, 22).

Eckhart conceptualized humanity as having two intersecting realities, where ephemeral human autonomy is rooted in the divine ground (*Liber Parabolorum Genesis II*, LW 1; Weiss 1964: n. 35, 502; *Expositio Libri Sapientiae*, LW 2; Weiss 1964: nn. 21–2, 342–3). Ground is, thus, a lithe metaphor in which apparently incongruous worlds (human and divine, time and eternity) coincide. The dynamic category of ground allows Eckhart to put two disjunctive concepts of nothingness into an interplay, contending that the human being is at the same time no-thing (a vacuous lack of existence) and nothing (saturating everything as He Who Is). The solipsistic, autonomous 'I' is a hollow and

ontologically famished no-thing. It merely contains an echo of an existence—a world qualitatively other than the ground (Pr. 71, DW 3; Quint 1976: 211–12, 219–20, 226–7).

Eckhart gives expression to the need for a radical apophatic methodology against the reifying characteristics of kataphatic theology. He locates his apophatic practice in the ground. Brimming forth from the ground and returning to it in a circular movement, his fluid construction of reality unsettles particulars and jars limiting binary structures of thought and experience (Pr. 71, DW 3; Quint 1976: 223, 225). For Eckhart, mystical discourse constitutes itself in the slippage between the sign and signified. Since the sign never catches up with the ever-receding signifier, saying leads to unsaying and the apophatic practice of detachment. However, since even unsaying demands the preceding act of saying—the attempt of trying to enclose God, which offers an illusion of control—God is ultimately the ‘unworded’ Word or Silence. God speaks God’s silent, hidden Word into the quiet ground of the soul. In the unfathomable depths of the soul’s ground, which coincides with the divine ground, the still soul transfigures its knowing into super-intellectual overformed knowing (Pr. 102, DW 4; Steer 2003: 420). Comparing Malachi 3: 1, ‘See, I send my angel,’ with Luke 7: 27, Eckhart notes that the Gospel of Luke omits the pronoun ‘I’ in its reappropriation of the Old Testament verse (Pr. 77, DW 3; Quint 1976: 337). Eckhart interprets the elision of the pronoun as apophatic discourse and a reference to God’s ineffability. Since God’s ground is inexpressible and beyond all names, referential terms and pronouns occlude the nothingness of the ground (Quint 1976: 337). Moreover, because God and the soul are indistinctly one, the omission of the ‘I’ also applies to the soul and signifies its ineffability (Quint 1976: 337–8).

In the German Sermon 101, Eckhart advances the metaphor of abyss to refer to the relationship between silence and the fusion of identities. In the perfectly empty soul—free of all images and of things created—God speaks God’s silent, hidden Word and God’s self into the abyss-soul (which is also God’s abyss), so that the soul may receive God as God is fully ‘with his all’ (Pr. 101, DW 4; Steer 2003: 345–6, 357). It is paradoxically in this silence that God reveals God’s self. As the soul leaps into the depth of the abyss following the silent, hidden Word, it recalibrates its knowing into overformed knowing, free of particularized and fragmented knowing (Pr. 102, DW 4; Steer 2003: 420). In the abyss, the soul is unknown even to itself, and it unknowns with God’s unknowing, inhabiting a learned ignorance (Pr. 103, DW 4; Steer 2003: 478).

While apophasis is a form of linguistic and intellectual detachment, Eckhart has an expansive notion of detachment that encompasses the practice of de-ontologizing. For Eckhart, detachment is a point of convergence between God and the human being: it is the ground for the possible fusion of identities. The more the soul proceeds in detachment, the more it knows God as One and the more it penetrates into the ground from whence everything sprouts: ‘The more one knows the root and the core and the ground of the godhead, the more one knows everything’ (Pr. 54a, DW 2; Quint 1971: 560).

Eckhart’s apophatic ethics is expressed in his notion of living and working ‘without a why’ (*sunder warumbe*), a concept intimately linked to detachment and ground. It is out of the inner ground that the human being performs without a why, not for the sake of

something but for the sake of nothing, which is God. Eckhart famously describes this wayless and whyless effervescent joyfulness in German Sermon 5b:

So long as you work all your works from the outside for the sake of the kingdom of heaven or for God's sake or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, you are truly wrong.... Whoever seeks God in ways, he takes the ways and loses God, who is hidden in ways. But whoever seeks God without ways, takes him as he is in himself.... Whoever continuously for a thousand years asks life: 'Why are you living?' If it would answer, it would only say: 'I live because I live.' That is because life lives out of its own ground and streams forth from its own; therefore it lives without a why in that it is living its self. (Pr. 5b, DW 1; Quint 1958: 90–2)

In his *Counsels of Discernment*, Eckhart maintains that all works stem from a person's ground (*Die rede der underscheidung*, DW 5; Quint 1963: 199). The works reflect the person's degree of groundedness. If you are wholly focused on God, you could, Eckhart alleges, step on a stone and it would be a more divine work than to take the body of Christ in the eucharist.

In Eckhart's rereading of the Mary and Martha narrative in German Sermon 86, the ground comes to signify the source of his this-worldly mysticism (a lived apophasis) and an integrated union between action and contemplation, reflective of the Dominican vocation of a *vita mixta*. This sermon subverts the prevailing reading of the Mary and Martha narratives (Luke 10: 38–42; John 12: 1–8), which privileges Mary as representing the contemplative life over Martha as symbolizing the active life. Instead, Martha is elevated as the spiritual example to emulate for she has lived long and well out of her ground. Perfectly detached and acting out of a 'well-exercised ground', Martha epitomizes true spiritual maturity as she serves Christ and actively practises life (Pr. 86, DW 3; Quint 1976: 481–3, 491–2). Conversely, Mary forgoes all activity and sits blissfully at Christ's feet because she is too infatuated with the rapturous feeling with which Christ's words suffuse her. Unlike much of the preceding tradition (e.g. Augustine), according to which Martha ultimately transforms into Mary when she realizes that the one thing necessary is contemplation, Eckhart's metaphor of the ground affords him a flexible reading practice of the biblical pericopes. Martha, perfectly detached and ebulliently working from her divine ground without any other motive than the One, labours with God's hands and sees with God's eyes.

The metaphor of ground also elucidates Eckhart's fundamental concept of the birth of the Son in the soul, a concept inextricably linked to detachment and living without a why. According to German Sermon 2, the soul becomes virginal and receptive through detachment. Yet again, playing with the antinomy of virgin and wife, Eckhart says that only as a virgin can the soul conceive and become a fruitful wife. As virgin-wife, the soul gives birth to the Son in the same ground where the Father gives birth to the Son and the soul becomes coeval with the Son (Pr. 2, DW 1; Quint 1958: 30–1). In German Sermon 5b, Eckhart further develops his linkage between birthing and his idea of a lived mysticism from the ground: 'As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives birth to his Son naturally,

as truly does he give birth to him in the innermost part of the spirit and this is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground and my ground is God's ground. Here I live out of my own, as God lives out of his own' (Pr. 5b, DW 1; Quint 1958: 90).

Eckhart forges a topographical intersection between birthing and his metaphor of abyss. In German Sermon 29, he poses the *Cur Deus Homo*-question and delivers his response in an unfettered Eckhartian manner: God became man so that I may be born as the same Son (Pr. 29, DW 2; Quint 1971: 84). God died to the world as an example of detachment and the Father bore the Son as a model for Sonship. As the only-begotten Son, the perfectly detached soul should not ask the Father for anything, Eckhart writes, for the Father already lavishes everything that he is and has, 'the abyss (*abgründlichkeit*) of the divine being and divine nature', on it (Quint 1971: 84). In German Sermon 12, he continues to explore this spatial junction with similar conclusions: as the only-begotten Son, the perfectly detached soul receives from the Father everything that belongs to the only-begotten Son, that is, the deep abyss of his divinity and the fullness of his being and nature (Pr. 12, DW 1; Quint 1958: 194).

As already indicated, the symbols of ground, abyss, and depth unravel any firm borders between divinity and humanity, time and eternity, since they present us with a fluid reality. Not surprisingly, then, birthing contains eternal and temporal dimensions. Eternally and ceaselessly, the Father births the Son into the ground (also identified with the spark of the soul), which is the placeless place of the fusion of identities between God and the human soul. Temporally, the Father births all created things that pre-exist in Him from the ground into time and space. The Son is born in the spark of the soul and this soul, becoming the Son Himself, gives birth back into the heart of the Father; the soul births the Son from and in the same ground where the Father gives birth to the Son eternally (Pr. 6, DW 1; Quint 1958: 109–10).

Since ground, abyss, and depth constitute foundational metaphors that position Eckhart's whole mystical theology, they also reorient his understanding of union away from a more traditional notion of a distinct, spiritual union of love and will based on 1 Corinthians 6: 17 ('Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him') towards a notion of indistinct union or a fusion of identities between human and divine. In German Sermon 12, Eckhart inscribes his notion of indistinct union in the ground onto the metaphor of the eye: 'The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving' (Pr. 12, DW 1; Quint 1958: 201). The metaphor articulates the fragmentation of the God-creature, subject-object, and self-other distinctions. Adapting the symbol of abyss to express his concept of indistinct union, Eckhart states that the perfectly detached human being dissolves completely in the divine abyss, leaving nothing (Quint 1958: 194). Distinct names and pronouns, illustrative of an illusory reality of separateness, dissipate in an abyss of oneness.

For Eckhart, union is a dynamic process rather than a fixed state (i.e. the proverbial last stop on the mystical journey). Indistinct union implies vibrant, effusive identity without identity, not a permanent cessation of motion. The act of flowing forth into creation and back into union, of grounding and uniting, means interminable flux. At times,

Eckhart appropriates the image of desert to portray the emptiness of the oneness in the depth of the ground or abyss. The desert illustrates both the hidden Godhead and the ground of the soul as well as the original and final fusion of identities in the ground. In the transparency of indistinct union, the noble soul enters into the innermost ground of the divine nature and wanders into a blooming desert. Here, there are no tracks left of you, God, and me. Reiner Schürmann expresses the activity of union in the desert-ground sublimely: 'In the desert, the wind and the sand wipe out the traces of the caravans: the steps of God disappear together with those of man and the world' (Schürmann 1978: 115).

A WIDE, IMPREGNABLE COUNTRY: ABYSS, GROUND, AND DEPTH IN THE MYSTICISM OF THOMAS MERTON

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky and an American writer, mystic, social activist, and renewer of religious life, adopts the notions of abyss, ground, and depth in a retrieval which derives much from Eckhart. Using a panoply of terms, Merton describes God, the eternal, boundless source as well as the core of the self, drawing upon all three of these concepts. These notions illustrate how God sees us and how we gaze back through God's gentle and loving eyes. We only become accessible to God and ourselves through the depth of the innermost eyelet of the self. Like Eckhart, Merton has a consistently apophatic stance. He argues that a symbol cannot be read in a too literal and objectivist fashion because then our own symbolism will mislead us to assume that it expresses more than an unknown reality: 'One may isolate the reality in a symbol, but then one must remember that it is not the symbol, and that the symbol itself is incapable of communicating the full reality. So that one must be able to say, immediately after using the symbol, "But the reality is not that." What is the reality? The only answer is that it is Unknown, but that one knows it by unknowing' (Merton 2004: 151).

Abyss, depth, and ground indicate an aperture at the core of the soul, which constitutes the human being's authentic, hidden self as well as God's own hidden essence and love (Merton 2007: 137). Merton, influenced by Eckhart, refers to it as the 'inner self, the inmost "I[,] ... the "ground" or "center" or "apex" of the soul' (Merton 2004: 13; see also Merton 1989: 151; 1971a: 101, 113, 154–6, 160–1, 207, 211). It coincides with God's ground, 'the abyss of purity and emptiness that is God', which can only be reached through detachment without any drawn roadmap (Merton 2007: 282). Diverging from Eckhart, union for Merton implies the disappearance of identities (rather than a fusion of identities) into pure Freedom and Love and is 'our emptiness in the presence of the abyss of His reality' (Merton 2007: 231, 283, 292). These true depths of reality can only be attained through contemplation and detachment. United with God in the abyss, its inward eye,

'the eye of the heart', is flooded by the divine light, receives a capacious perspective, and sees with God's eyes only (2007: 130).

Recalling Eckhart, Merton contests the ontological reality of the autonomous self and puts forward two notions of nothingness. He recognizes a dialectic between the immanence and transcendence of humanity in his sketching of the interplay between the true and false selves. At times, however, Merton moves the lens a bit in his configuration of the concepts of depth, ground, and abyss, so that they designate the chasm between the authentic self and the idolatrous pseudo-self ('a mask and a fabrication', 'this cramp of the imagination'). The pseudo-self, with mechanical conformity, observes the externally imposed societal, cultural, and religious expectations of the self (Merton 1971b: 70; 1989: 265; 2007: 7, 33–5). He also uses the terms to express the endless width of the true self as well as the vacancy of the phantom self, as a dialectic of nothingness and no-thingness. Additionally, Merton recasts the notion of being born into sin to mean coming into the world with a pseudo-self. The human being lives life under 'a sign of contradiction', simultaneously straddling the chasm of the dual identities of existence and non-existence (Merton 2007: 33–34). The tyrannical autonomous 'I', having cultivated the mythology of its own exceptionalism and self-sufficiency, lives a life of atomized existence and zealously guards the borders of its own perceived separateness. This anaesthetized pseudo-self confuses self-realization with its persistent flight into irresponsibility (Merton 2007: 56). The cycle of diminishment destructively contracts the self, even though, in truth, all of God's power as creative Love already belongs to the human being as her autonomy liquefies in the ground (Merton 1989: 345–6).

Spurred on by 'the heresy of individualism', the pseudo-self in its chasmal state can only forge a pseudo-identity over against others by negating everyone else, without realizing that such self-construction leaves no-thing to affirm (Merton 1989: 143–4, 224–5, 265). As for Eckhart, the idea that our pseudo-self can be affirmed while we ignore our true being is a fanciful *ignis fatuus*. Merton notes: 'This calls for a constant adjustment of "yes" and "no" as we try to walk on a tightrope over an abyss of nothingness. The "adjustment" is a fiction and so is the tightrope. The abyss of nothingness is, in fact, the abyss of Being' (1989: 266). Echoing Augustine, Merton holds that the idea that we have an individual choice at our disposal is a figment of the imagination, for just as there is only one God there is only one reality: the abyss of nothingness which converges with the abyss of Being, in the fullest affirmation of existence.

Contemplation, Merton writes, unmasks the illusory self. The illusory self is no-thing but a finite spectre poorly anchored in 'the ground of doubt and self-questioning' and consumed by its own trivialities (Merton 1971b: 24, 90). The ground of doubt and self-questioning uncovers a deep existential dread and exile that propels a journey into the depth of one's being, revealing the continuous self-harm to one's own innermost truth. Through contemplative practices, the false self is dismantled as a conceptual object and the true self immerses itself in the abyss, which is her own authentic life and being as well as God's. By facing one's humanity at 'the deepest and most central where the void seems to open out into black despair', the contemplative wanders to the brim of the infinite abyss, bristling with the transformative gifts granted by God's gracious love

(Merton 1971b: 24, 88–90, 94; 2004: 15; 1989: 151). It is through contemplative praxis that the human being awakens to its 'own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God' (Merton 2007: 9). Paradoxically, the pseudo-self, which in its vacant nihilism is no-thing ('he who is not'), fears the boundless nothingness of the depth that is God and the true self ('him who is'). This infinite depth is not a hollow interstice but the fullness of the experience of reality (Merton 2004: 53; 1989: 286).

Contemplative prayer (the 'prayer of the heart') penetrates the ground or depth of our being, where my true identity (nothingness) lies bare (Merton 1971b: 30–1, 68; 2004: 89). It gives the human being the simple courage to be from the ground—'the courage without which life cannot be faced as it is and loses its real meaning'—in the most intimate presence with God, and in the deepest solidarity with one's fellow human beings (Merton 2004: 153). Similar to Eckhart and (as we will see) Sölle, this ground, depth, or abyss in its catachretic structure opens up 'the Abyss of the unknown yet present', which offers us a direct vista of reality—the simple presence of God—and submerses us into 'a deep awareness of the ground of our identity before God and in God' (Merton 1971b: 33, 67, 70, 83). Merton expands the conceptual metaphors for human identity by letting the terms depict the coincidence of identities between God and the human being who has attained purity of heart (1971b: 67–8).

Merton plays with antinomy throughout his writings in order to undercut the oppositional relationships that construct our understanding. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the geographically opposed terms 'summit' and 'depth' are, in his spiritual landscape, concurrent in meaning: 'In this superconscious realm of mystery is hidden not only the summit of man's spiritual being... but also the presence of God, Who dwells at his hidden summit... Faith then brings man into contact with man's own inmost spiritual depths and with God, Who is present within those same depths' (Merton 2007: 138–9).

Merton provides no geography of certitude and stability, no topographical space where we are propped up over against the world of objects, 'in a posture of desire, defiance, suspicion, greed, or fear' (Merton 2004: 19). Conscious of the approximations of language and our inarticulateness in the face of God, Merton tries to sustain an imaginative space against potentially misleading 'formal' theological concepts with their pretence of exactness and objectiveness of thought (Merton 2007: 8). Instead, he contends that from the ground we see reality as it is through God's eyes, without taking refuge 'behind a screen of conceptual prejudices and verbalistic distortions' (Merton 2004: 20). In his 'nonlogical logic of mysticism', Merton, like Eckhart, keeps the metaphors fluid, resisting fixed reference points through his espousal of topographical metaphors, which themselves are negated by the experience of God's clear darkness (Merton 2007: 231).

Merton adopts the position that experience precedes language when it comes to the gift of understanding God. However, it is not an experience that can become fixed in one's memory because that would demand a subject–object binary; you do not 'have' an experience that can be possessed, but 'you become Experience' (2007: 283). Remembering and talking about something necessitates a subject–object divide; thus, the human being must 'emerge from His depths before words and ideas could separate themselves out and take shape in our minds. For in the depths of contemplative prayer

there seems to be no division between subject and object, and there is no reason to make either statement about God or about oneself. He IS and this reality absorbs everything else' (2007: 267). By becoming the Experience, the human being awakens to a new reality free of alienation and distortions. Referencing William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Merton notes that in this experiential awakening the 'doors of perception' open up and bestow a completely new meaning on all of life (1971a: 161). The semiotic process of constructing new worlds of meaning through metaphors assists in this opening of the doors of perception.

Without glossing over differences between Merton and Eckhart, both thinkers contend that detachment constitutes a path to liberation from the 'painful duty of saying what I really do not think and acting in a way that betrays God's truth and the integrity of [my] own soul' (Merton 1971b: 4). Detachment implies release from a set script in which life is lived externally and on the surface. Detachment allows the trap door to fall open under our feet, releasing the self to become its own door to God; the self now sinks into its ground, reconciled with its true self and God, and experiences union with God. Merton offers a breathtaking depiction of this journey:

A door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact. God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us.... [A] supernatural instinct teaches us that the function of this abyss of freedom that has opened out within our midst... is to draw us utterly out of our own selfhood and into its own immensity of liberty and joy. You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist.... And yet now you have become nothing. You have sunk to the center of your own poverty, and there you have felt the doors fly open into infinite freedom, into a wealth which is perfect because none of it is yours and yet it all belongs to you.... It is useless to think of fathoming the depths of wide-open darkness that have yawned inside you, full of liberty and exultation. They are not a place, not an extent, they are huge, smooth activity. These depths, they are Love. And in the midst of you they form a wide, impregnable country. (Merton 2007: 227–8)

Similarly, a moment of detached lucidity on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville grants Merton vivid perception of the almost painful exquisiteness and magnetism of every human being's inner ground, abounding with love and nothingness:

Then it was if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God... This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as... our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in

everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (Merton 1989: 158)

Through detachment from the false self and the realization that the glimmering divine spark (or virginal point or virgin eye) shines in us like the sun, every being not only rediscovers that his identity expands beyond the shadowy autonomous 'I' and is One with God's identity, but comes to recognize that same divinity and dignity in every other being, reflecting Merton's (and Eckhart's and Sölle's) egalitarian mysticism. It is in and through this spark, point, or eye that God bestows upon us God's perspective, so that we see God as God is and ourselves and our fellow human beings as we are and as God sees us.

In a joyous realization, Merton maps the relationships, unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence that constitute the web of reality of our life world, even though it is coeval with the world of the bomb, race hatred, mass media, and mass consumption rooted in rapacious individualism (1989: 157; see also 1971a: 29–30, 145–6). The world—where the human being is present to God, self, neighbour, and creation—should not necessarily be conceived as an externalized, reified structure, but is unearthed in the inner ground and deepest self; it is 'a living and self-creating mystery . . . to which I am myself my own unique door. When I find the world in my own ground, it is impossible for me to be alienated by it' (Merton 1971a: 154–6).

To see the depth of reality means to see God, world, and self in each other free of stasis and bifurcation. Contemplation and detachment are processes by which the human being uncovers the person she truly is, in and from the ground, known only by God. Contemplation and detachment offer the possibility of authentic community, since the light of God flickers through the depths of our fellow human beings' souls, its lustre disclosing God's image in them. Contemplation and detachment not only reveal God's perspective on us, but they also compel us to a communal vision. God's eye becomes my eye; my eye becomes God's eye.

A MYSTICISM OF WIDE-OPEN EYES: SEEING AND BEING THE GROUND IN THE THOUGHT OF DOROTHEE SÖLLE

While there are different inflections in the writings of Eckhart, Merton, and Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003), each integrates mystical experience and prophetic demands for social justice with their use of the metaphors ground, abyss, and depth. Sölle, a German liberation theologian, writer, and mystic, contends that 'theological reflection without political consequences [is] tantamount to blasphemy. . . . Every theological statement

has to be at the same time a political one' (Sölle 1999: 38). While she recognizes 'the helplessness of the language' as mere dust on the mirror of experience, she still underscores the political power of mystical speech (Sölle 2001: 55–6, 59). The very fibre of spirituality and mystical language is, for her, political radicalization. Both Merton and Sölle share profound concerns regarding the stirring of wars and the accelerating arms race, xenophobia, racism, imperialism, globalization, individualization, suffering, poverty, mass consumerism, and ecocide (Sölle 1999: 31). Fear, hatred of the other, and a trivialization of life dominate, rather than the recognition of our interdependence and interconnectedness.

Sölle's bold hermeneutical starting point is that everyone is a mystic 'in the sense of a demand on life that cannot be relinquished', which radically valorizes everyday life in a mysticism of resistance that changes social orders and offers an 'alternate praxis of life' (Sölle 2001: 15, 51; Sölle 1999: 99). There is an indissoluble nexus between mysticism and amazement (the marvel of being-in-relation that 'tears away the veil of triviality'), letting-go (stepping out of the self and its imagined needs as 'the spiritual foundation for a different vision of common life'), and resistance (transformation of the world). Resistance sprouts from a conversion stemming from the ground, from the ground of being that entails non-violent thinking and acting together with other living beings, which broadens the horizon of concern beyond individualistic self-realization towards societal, economic, and ecological transformation (Sölle 2001: 89–90, 216). The mystical movement from amazement to letting-go to resistance exhibits a shift from kataphasis (affirmation), to apophasis (negation), to silent union. Union for Sölle signifies an eyes-wide-open being in and one with creation—a new vision for and relationship to the world (Sölle 2001: 232, 292–93). 'In the sense of theology that liberates, the soul that is united with God sees the world with God's eyes,' she writes. 'That soul, like God, sees what otherwise is rendered invisible and irrelevant. It hears the whimpering of starving children and does not let itself be diverted from real misery, becoming one with God in perceiving and understanding as well as acting. . . . In liberating movements, the mystical eye sees God at work: seeing, hearing, acting, even in forms that are utterly secular. . . . It is a mysticism of wide-open eyes' (Sölle 2001: 283–4).

Like Eckhart and Merton, Sölle appropriates and recasts the metaphorical language of abyss, ground, and depth ('God within me', 'the ground of life', etc.) to fit her context and address her theo-political concerns (Sölle 1999: 33–4; Sölle, 1991: 155). Similar to Eckhart, Sölle employs the notions of abyss, depth, and ground to mark the limitless core of the soul, which overcomes the dichotomy between human and divine (Sölle 2001: 100, 106). She also casts the terms as collective sites of resistance and change (Sölle 1984: 86). However, unlike Eckhart's and Merton's notions of abyss, for Sölle the metaphor also refers to suffering, the most abject despair and hopelessness (the despondency of the engulfing no-thingness of suffering), as was experienced by Job or in the gas chambers during the Holocaust. It is a vortical abyss that hides and silences God and makes any experience of love unbearable because it dismiss any possibility of escape into numbness (Sölle 2001: 146, 152). Thus, the spatial metaphors of ground, depth, and abyss do

not function as scenic, yet anaemic, descriptors of God ('symbolic prisons'), but as paths to radical liberation and belonging.

In her writings, Sölle keeps circling back to Eckhart's notion of 'without a why' to express 'essential being, ... the "innermost ground" in which purposes, even religious ones like eternal blessedness, have no further part to play' (Sölle 1991: 40). '[G]rounding in the ground of life' yields a true joy, an uncontainable happiness in being alive, which—to draw on her 'best friend from the Middle Ages' Meister Eckhart—is without a why and thus not centred on particular things and events (Sölle 1999: 167–8). She roots the notion of life without a why in her own experience of the peace movement and the recurring question about measurable success (or the lack thereof) and the ostensible hopelessness of her activism. With equal consistency, she meets this demand for concrete results with her own whyless Eckhartian counter-question, 'Why do you accomplish your deeds?', while recognizing the futility of her reply in face of a cynicism that insists on palpable success rather than on the truth and value of the act itself (Sölle 1991: 41; see also Sölle 2001: 232, 294). This whyless Eckhartian counter-question reflects groundedness in a love and a vision so vast that one as One can only love with God's love and see with God's eyes. Sölle explains: 'But the rose has no why, and one has to do some things *sunder warumbe*, even when they meet with no success now. There is an inner strength of being-at-peace that cannot make the goal orientation of action the measure of all things. All non-violent action in a violent world participates, in a sense, in the "without a why" of the rose...' (Sölle 1991: 41; see also Sölle 2001: 60–1). It is in the perfectly free and open act without a why that we (with Rumi) finally perceive the no-thingness caused by individualism. The torpid 'I' has fallen asleep in a prison guarded by the zealous ego even though God's world is so munificent and vast. It is at this moment of perception, in this now of attentiveness and unencumbered freedom, in the ground of mystical relationality and non-calculating, purposeless love, that we, perfectly self-forgetful, can say (with C. S. Lewis), 'I am what I do' (Sölle 2001: 24–6, 29, 36, 176–7, 209). Mutually saturating concepts, the ground and the Eckhartian and Söllean 'without a why', articulate questions at the forefront of our moment about justice, peace, and preferential love for the poorest of the poor and the planet.

Building on Eckhart's concepts of oneness in the ground and the birth of the Son in the soul, in which the soul assumes the identity of the Son, Sölle develops a theory of suffering. She maintains that human suffering in all its abject misery is united with God; human suffering penetrates God's pain and God's pain permeates human pain in a unity of identities in the ground. Nothing shackles humans more than to reify transcendence and so obstruct divine and human interchange (Sölle 1997: 189). Life is lived and history unfolds from the ground through God's kenosis, a gift entirely contrary to a fixed, essentialized, and a-relational God, and a fixed, essentialized, and a-relational God-talk (Pinnock 2003: 61–6). Employing oxymoron, Sölle names God the Silent Cry that undoes voiceless powerlessness through loving presence and forms us into a brimming dialogue. She also contends that it is only by unsettling dualistic and imperialistic relationships and discourses, by undoing and unthinking utilitarian master/owner/

free-servant/owned/slave relationships, that all living beings can be offered their share of life, in solidarity and interdependent love. In the communal web of life, we become God's co-creators and recognize God's own interdependence (Sölle 1999: 70, 97, 156). Then, life and cosmos stream forth from our innermost ground or depth where we are One. Troubling hierarchical and dualistic relationships and discourses, Sölle states:

[T]he master-slave relationship is very often expressly criticized in mystical texts... [H]uman beings do not honor God because of his power and lordship, but submerge themselves in him, or as they always say, in his love. He is the ground, as Meister Eckhart says, love, depth, sea. Such nature symbols are preferred where God demands no obedience but union, where a distant other does not demand sacrifice and renunciation of self, where harmony and oneness with the living become the theme of religion. In this religion the most important virtue is then no longer obedience but solidarity. (Sölle 1981: 183)

For Sölle, the mystical tradition—and especially Eckhart and his notion of ground—challenges hierarchical and binarized lord-servant language, creating a disruptive space with its metaphors. If we bracket her vexed essentialist linkage between nature and woman-/mother-hood, we can still appreciate how she uses the metaphors of ground and depth to untether Christian theological discourse from notions of domination and subservience, in favour of alternative realities that embrace love, life, stillness, union, and solidarity, to confront economic injustice and ecocide: 'In the mystical tradition... people... want to drown themselves in God's love, which is the "ground" of their existence' (Sölle 2006: 49). By making a connection between living from the ground and living in solidarity, she stands in continuity with Eckhart's linkage between ground and living without a why as well as Merton's correlation between ground and the interconnectedness and interdependence of all reality. However, she also forges her own theo-political territory by introducing solidarity as a mystical concept. As a liberation theologian living and working in the global climate of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, she argues that solidarity vitiates both political and theological individualism and solipsism, thus retrieving the heritage of a this-worldly mysticism as well as the new concerns of her theo-political moment.

A mysticism of wide-open eyes fractures the Cartesian devotion to the ego and 'an anesthetized logic of separatism' in a Copernican revolution that displaces the human being from the centre of life itself and ceases to see non-human life as disposable and quantifiable (Sölle 1999: 145). Moreover, the panentheistic notion that God, while not tantamount to the cosmos, is the ground that births the world and pervades it, qualifies the construct of a predominantly other-worldly, transcendent God and a world stratified into holy and secular, inner and outer, private and public-political (Sölle 2001: 104; Sölle 1999: 90–1). In her theo-poetry, Sölle returns to this paradox, understanding God's transcendence and immanence dialectically: God's being is more than the web of creation while also embedded in it. Thus, God's ground integrates every dimension of life, and it is into this ground (or depth or ocean) that we must sink in order to be truly in the world and live out God (Sölle 1991: 70).

Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle have much in common while also amplifying different emphases—Eckhart's on detachment and living without a why, Merton's on contemplative engagement with the world, and Sölle's on solidarity and resistance. Eckhart, Merton, and Sölle draw out the way that this perception of reality as 'all in all' has at its very core concrete ecological, economic, social, and political implications. The idea of the world as a hypostasized object outside of us is a destructive delusion, because it implies the possibility of disconnection. The failure to recognize that human and divine reality interpenetrates the world of nature and history at their very core contributes to the human avoidance of taking full responsibility for the world. Our unwillingness to recognize our relatedness, interdependence, and interconnectedness spurs the undoing of creation and earth in their grittiness and beauty. It is this subterfuge, rejecting the idea that reality is a web of relationships, interdependence, and interconnectedness, which has pushed us out of the Holocene epoch and into the Anthropocene epoch of hegemonic autonomy, nation states, and unregulated economics with their potentially catastrophic consequences. Mindfulness of a shared ground, as articulated in Eckhart's, Merton's, and Sölle's thought-worlds, is hence of the highest contemporary relevance. As expressed in their 'this-worldly', democratizing mysticisms, to live out the ground means to behold reality in its pure translucency without bifurcations and, hence, to see with God's eyes the beauty and dignity that we all possess and to deepen, filled with love, our relationship with the present (Pinnock 2003: 32). Extending Karl Rahner's idea that 'Christianity of the third millennium will be mystical or not at all' in the direction of ecotheology, Sölle sees the theological notions of creation and redemption as interlinked and communal (Sölle 2001: 108). She contends that '[t]he biosphere is a community of living beings bound one to the other...I think that mystical spirituality of oneness with nature is the best preparation for the other life we are looking for. Dealing sacramentally with bread and water, one's own body and our nonhuman sisters and brothers, and with energy, the Cosmos itself will grow from the abyss that is our domination-free ground' (Sölle 2001: 112). It is a comprehensive perspective adduced by the mystical metaphors of ground, abyss, and depth.

CONCLUSION

The beautiful and complex mystical topography offered to us via the metaphors of abyss, ground, and depth invites us to become cartographers that chart new life worlds and relationships. The concepts disclose relationships between God, self, neighbour, and the larger universe. Heterogeneous in character, the New Mysticism, in which these terms evolved, provided discursive and theological opportunities for development. Though our interlocutors appropriated the ideas from each other, they also reinscribed them to host their mystical sensibilities and public-prophetic concerns, to look with new eyes at everyday life while also seeing beyond the limitations of the here and now.

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CHAPTER 17

EROTIC AND NUPTIAL IMAGERY

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INTRODUCTION

‘THE mystical discourse of love thus shows that the erotic and the sacred need not be understood in terms of radical opposition’ (Jeanrond 2010: 18). ‘Radical opposition’ is, as Werner G. Jeanrond notes in his *A Theology of Love*, the default position of much contemporary Christian theology when confronted by eros (see Jeanrond 2010: 27–8). Yet, the tide appears to be turning. In certain quarters philosophers and theologians are beginning to ask why Christian agape should not be expansive enough to incorporate eros (Marion 2007; Burrus and Keller 2006; Kamitsuka 2010). Jeanrond points out that there is perhaps no better place to look for a positive response than the mystical theology of the patristic and medieval periods (Jeanrond 2010: esp. 67–96). This chapter sets out to explore (1) how and why mystical theology in the West embraced the erotic, configuring humanity’s relationship to God in terms of marriage, and (2) what might be gained from taking such an approach to Christian love seriously.

I would like to begin with an event which Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1439), an English mystic, records in her *Book*, in which she claims that in Rome, on 9 November 1414, she married God the Father—despite already being married to one John Kempe. She records in her vision of the ceremony how Mary and the Saints looked on and prayed for the couple’s future happiness and that the marriage resulted in spiritual and physical pleasures:

The Father also said to this creature [Margery], ‘Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end.’... she was still and did not answer..., but wept amazingly

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Hannah Young, my sister and my friend.

much, desiring to have himself ['Christ Jesus, whose manhood she loved so much'] still, and in no way be parted from him . . . And then the Father took her by the hand [spiritually] . . . saying to her soul: 'I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, provided that you are humble and meek in doing so . . . And then the Mother of God and all the saints that were present there in her soul prayed that they might have much joy together.' . . . [She], with great abundance of tears, thanked God for this spiritual comfort . . . for she felt many comforts, both spiritual comforts and bodily comforts.

(1.35, 2816–19, 2843, 2848–55, 2858–9, 2860–3; Windeatt 1985: 124)

What are we to make of this seemingly extravagant claim? What possible spiritual value is to be found in such a bringing together of the sacred and the erotic? Are they not better kept apart? Is this nothing more than a childish fantasy? Indeed, should erotic love of any flavour be valued as spiritual? It is such questions that I hope to address in this chapter.

EROS AND NUPTIAL IMAGERY: THE BACK STORY

As Bernard McGinn has pointed out (1992: 211), any account of erotic love in the Christian mystical tradition starts within Origen (185–254), for it was he who bequeathed to the West the idea that the Song of Songs was one of the most important spiritual texts in the Bible and that Christian theologies of love were in some sense nuptial. He did so in dialogue with the cultural understandings of his day (see Edwards 2013: 103–8). Origen, arguably the Christian mystical tradition's first founding father, received a formal philosophical education under Ammonius Saccas (the teacher of Plotinus) (Louth 1981: 53). Already a Christian, Origen was keen to justify scripture's anthropomorphic representations of God to a Hellenistic culture for whom they seemed deeply simplistic. More than this, he was convinced that the Christian wisdom of the Bible was more than a match for the wisdom of the Platonists.

In this relation, Origen argued that scripture operates on both literal and spiritual levels and that some passages do not have 'a logically coherent narrative meaning' (Origen, *On First Principles* 2.5; Greer 1979: 183). These in particular, he claimed, were intended to aid the soul enmeshed in the world to rise beyond the physical, back to a God who transcended all. As Gordon Rudy comments, 'Origen claims the Logos is especially present in those passages most inappropriate to God and spiritual things. Because their obvious meaning cannot be accepted, they . . . force the exegete to find an immaterial and spiritual referent, and so lure the interpreter beyond the material realm to immaterial spirit' (2002: 21). He understood the Song of Songs, which speaks of sexual union, and which Jewish, as well as Christian exegetes, like Ambrose, had understood as an

allegory of the union between God and his people, to be the supreme example of such a non-literal text (see McGinn 1992).

Also underpinning his hermeneutic was Origen's belief that all the wisdom of the Platonists was already present within the Bible if only one understood how to interpret it. For him, a key example was the works of Solomon—Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs—which, in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, he posits as a spiritual trilogy prior to the Stoic triad that advocated spiritual progress (1) through the acquisition of virtue, (2) acting according to one's true nature, and (3) receiving insights that transcended the physical in the 'epoptic' or 'mystical' stage (see Edwards, 2013: 108 n. 24). As he states, 'It seems to me, then, that all the sages of the Greeks borrowed these ideas from Solomon, who had learnt them by the Spirit of God at an age and time long before their own' (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 3; Lawson 1957: 40, also see 39ff.). The Stoic model was one of increasing introspection; reflecting this Origen added a further emphasis on the individual soul as bride of Christ the bridegroom to already existing Jewish and Christian allegorical readings (see Edwards 2013: 104). The Song of Songs, for Origen, thus brought together two facets of mystical theology: it acted as a prior example of Hebrew wisdom and it demonstrated circumstances in which the text could not be read literally.

Origen came to view the erotic and nuptial images of the Song of Songs as a form of divine outreach, through which God lifted souls from a worldly understanding of love to a rarefied transcendent one. The text for him demonstrates God's love for humanity in offering an account of love in language that we can engage with, so as to progress beyond it:

Since, then, it is impossible for a man living in the flesh to know anything of matters hidden and invisible unless he has apprehended some image and likeness thereto among things visible, I think that He who made all things in wisdom so created all the species of visible things upon earth, that He placed in them some teaching and knowledge of things invisible and heavenly, whereby the human mind might mount to spiritual understanding and seek the grounds of things in heaven; so that taught by God's wisdom, it might say: *The things that are hid and that are manifest have I learned.* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.12; Lawson 1957: 220–1)

For Origen, the erotic and nuptial imagery opens up a vista of love and sensation of which human eroticism and sensation are but dim metaphorical echoes. Yet as a consequence, Origen believed that the text held great dangers for the uninitiated and spiritual novice, who might simply interpret its language of breasts, kisses, and union literally:

But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach [the Song of Songs], to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the

spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust! For this... I therefore advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood... to refrain completely from reading this little book...

(*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 1; Lawson 1957: 22–3)

The very last thing that Origen wanted was that someone should read this text and think that the Bible was 'egging him on to fleshly lust!' However, as Mark Edwards points out, 'only a desultory reader would take... any text in the Song of Songs under Origen's guidance as a charter for profane love' (Edwards 2013: 105). As Edwards comments, Origen's understanding of spiritual love was far more rarefied, and only in this vein did he speak of nuptial relations between God and the soul:

A commentator on the Song of Solomon may freely speak of this inward conflagration—he may even speak of the nuptials of the soul and Christ, and of the chastity of their offspring—since the Christian who is admitted to the perusal of this book will already know that a prurient application of its imagery would not be consistent with the notorious wisdom of its author. (Edwards 2013: 107)

As in Plato's *Symposium*, Origen spoke of an eros that carried none of the physical taint of the erotic as manifest in ordinary life (see Edwards 2013: 107 n.23 and Rist 1964: 206–9).

Gordon Rudy therefore points out that, although Origen also introduces the idea of spiritual sensation into mystical theology, he intended no connection with physical sensing. It is rather a hermeneutical tool: '[b]iblical references to sense organs and sensation [that] label something that allows the inner person to apprehend the spiritual meaning of the Bible and be transformed by it' (Rudy 2002: 26). Edwards stresses, however, we should be cautious in assuming that no experiential element underpins Origen's exegesis. At the same time we should not try to detach Origen's ideas of spiritual sensation from intellectual exegetical study; for Origen they were one and the same. As Edwards notes, Origen does not provide 'a detailed chronicle of his inward throes and ecstasies for the sake of other aspirants to a communion with God' (Edwards 2013: 105). Neither does Origen suggest that the ordinary carnal meaning of eros is spiritual desire. His understanding of true love for God is nonetheless intense and passionate and Origen believes rightly spoken of in terms of eros, despite the Bible not favouring this term (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 2; Lawson 1957: 30–3). Indeed, in so arguing Origen provided a platform of intimacy, born out of scriptural exegesis, on which others would build greater sanctity into the human capacity to love and feel. We find its beginnings in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, which witnessed a great revival of interest in human love and its place within Christian society (see Capellanus 1990; Reddy 2012; Classen 2002; Cooney 2006; Spearing 1993; Scaglione 1963; Duby 1994).

MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENTS: EROS HUMAN AND DIVINE

There is little doubt that the most important of the theological responses came from Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), who produced a series of highly influential sermons on the Song of Songs, as well as a treatise on love, *On Loving God*. Bernard's innovation was to add to the Christological dimension of Origen's approach a new emphasis on Christ's humanity and its relation to the anthropomorphic language of the Song (however, see Zona 1999). This allowed Bernard to justify the incorporation of human forms of loving into Christian spirituality rather than place the truly spiritual completely outside the realm of the physical, as Origen had arguably done. We can illustrate this if we briefly consider how Bernard understands the incarnation, along with his sense of spiritual progress as exemplified by a series of kisses.

In sermon 20 in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard states that the purpose of the incarnation was to recapture human affections and that the act of falling in love with Christ in human form opens the door to love of his divinity. Love itself draws you from one to the other:

I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.

(Sermon 20.4.6; Walsh 1981: 152)

Rather than suggesting that human love be restrained, Bernard argues that it simply needs to be redirected. In so mooting Bernard clearly intimates a closer connection between God and the soul than advocated by Origen's treatment of eros—in which human love was little more than a dull metaphorical echo of its true erotic counterpart. As Bernard goes on to claim:

carnal love is worthwhile since through it sensual love is excluded...it becomes better when it is rational, and becomes perfect when it is spiritual.

(Sermon 20.5.9; Walsh 1981: 154)

Thus it is that in exegeting the verse, 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth' (Song of Songs 1: 1), Bernard writes of different levels of love or kisses by means of which one may approach God. First there is the kiss of God's feet, that is, Christ's humanity, from which one can progress to the kiss of the hand—Christ's divinity—after which, on rare occasions, one may be allowed to kiss the kiss of God's mouth, that is, enter into an intimate union and knowledge of God. In the first stage you realize that your sins have been forgiven, in the second you receive the grace to persevere, finally you are ready for intimate union. The image of kissing makes clear that the stages are cumulative:

Though you have made a beginning by kissing the feet, you may not presume to rise at once by impulse to the kiss of the mouth; there is a step to be surmounted in between, an intervening kiss on the hand... I do not want to be suddenly in the heights, my desire is to advance by degrees... You will please him [God] far more readily if you live within the limits proper to you, and do not set your sights on things beyond you. It is a long and formidable leap from the foot to the mouth... Still tarnished as you are with the dust of sin, would you dare to touch those sacred lips... Once you have had this twofold experience of God's benevolence in these two kisses, you need no longer feel abashed in aspiring to a holier intimacy.

(Sermon 3.2.3; Walsh 1981: 18–19; also see Sermons 2 and 4)

In so suggesting, I think that Bernard would have disagreed with both Andrew Louth and Josef Pieper that Christian theology's proper task is to 'hinder and resist the natural craving of all the human spirit' (Pieper 1952, quoted in Louth 1983: 146). For Bernard, the ordinary focus of our natural carnal cravings is simply misdirected. Indeed, he argues that '[carnal] devotion to the humanity of Christ is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit' (Sermon 20.4.8; Walsh 1981: 154). It may not be the highest part of love, but it is nonetheless necessary to 'love God with your whole the heart' if one is to love God at all (Sermon 20.4.6–9; Walsh 1981: 153–5). Thus, Denys Turner seems right in claiming that Bernard was in love with God at every level and erotically so (Turner 1995b: 79ff.; also see Sommerfeldt 1991: 95–151 and Casey 1988). Indeed, although Bernard does not conflate physical and spiritual sensations, unlike Origen he never suggests a disembodied love of God; even after the resurrection he stresses that human embodiment continues to impinge on one's loving union (Edwards 2013: 108). Whilst one could construe this negatively, Bernard treats it positively, for in exegeses of the Song of Songs he delights in the redirection of carnal love to spiritual ends rather than simply in rarefied and 'spiritual' love.

In this vein, Bernard also developed the nuptial understanding of the Song of Songs in a more intimate direction. From Origen, he had inherited a tradition of reading this text as a dialogue between a bride and bridegroom, with the bride interpreted as both the Church and the individual soul in communion with God, the groom (Edwards 2013: 104; also see Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 29.16; also see Halfants 1981: pp. ix–xxx; Moritz 1980). Yet M. Corneille Halfants points to the deeply sensitive quality of Bernard's writing that weaves together personal and communal experience, as for instance when Bernard notably writes:

Today the text we are to study is the book of experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.'

(Sermon 3.1.1; Walsh 1981: 16)

Bernard here invites the readers/listeners into the possibility of sharing in a deep relationship with the divine, one that is configured in nuptial terms. As Bernard elsewhere writes, 'We do not hesitate boldly to proclaim that every soul, if it is vigilant and careful in the practice of the virtues, can arrive at this holy repose and enjoy the

embraces of the Bridegroom' (Sermon 57.4.11 in Halflants 1981: p. x). His closer association of spiritual and earthly marriage echoed society's stance as a whole, which, as Edward Schillebeeckx notes, drew increasing parallels between earthly marriage and the vows taken by religious women, such that in the ceremonies both assumed a veil (Schillebeeckx 1965: 34–64). Indeed, the way in which he loves God challenges the division between physical and spiritual love that Origen had put in place, and so opened the way theologically for far more physical responses to spiritual love, as I will discuss.

Yet Bernard was not the only author exploring the place of the erotic within theology in the twelfth century. The idea that spiritual love is cumulative, and incorporates a human component, is also found in Richard of St Victor's *Four Degrees of Violent Love*. Here Richard (d. 1173) argues that marital/romantic love and love for God are two sides of the same coin, such that both progress through four stages or degrees:

Therefore the first degree of violence [vehement love] exists when the mind cannot resist its desire, while the second degree exists when that desire cannot be forgotten. Truly, the third exists when the mind can know nothing but its desire, while the fourth, which is also the last, exists when not even that very thing his mind desires is able to satisfy it. (*On Love* 2.17; Kraebel 2012: 282)

The first of these loves he describes as 'insuperable', the second 'inseparable', the third 'singular', and the fourth 'insatiable'. According to Richard, only the first of these has any place within a healthy human marital relationship; insuperable love can be of benefit in binding the marital partners together. Yet, beyond this he regards investment in human love as a slippery slope into the melancholia of love-sickness that ultimately ends in madness and hatred (see Wack 1990):

like an invalid beyond hope, this man lies down with half-dead limbs... the man who pants under the flame of this sort of boiling desire... whatever consolation is offered, it does not touch his mind... It is as if he were near death... In this state love (*amor*) often turns into something like madness... still more amazingly, often at the same time, they hate one another, although they never cease to boil with desire...

(*On Love* 2.15; Kraebel 2012: 281)

This same drive, however, when put to spiritual ends, is deeply beneficial. Instead of leading to physical catatonia the soul experiences a death to self that allows it to attain an incredible level of union with God in which love flows mutually (Arblaster 2015: 131). This is a different kind of self-annihilation, one that is a new/true (re)birth. Drawing on St Paul, he states that Love causes the soul to melt and then remoulds it:

Therefore, when the soul has in this manner been melted away in the divine fire, inwardly softened and thoroughly liquefied, what then will remain except that 'the good will of God, pleasing and perfect,' be displayed to the soul, as if that divine will were a certain mold of consummate virtue to which it might be shaped?... this type

of man becomes a new creature: 'the old things have passed away, and, behold, all things have been made new.' For in the third degree he has been killed; in the fourth, as it were, rising from the dead, 'he dies no more; death no longer has dominion over him, insofar as he lives, he lives for God.' (4.42, 45; Kraebel 2012: 293, 294)

In so suggesting, Richard, like Bernard, advocates that human love is not fundamentally distinct from the love of God, even if it is God's Love that ultimately unites the soul to God. Richard regarded such love of God as the proper end of the human propensity to desire.

Yet, unlike Bernard, Richard seems to claim that the final degree is a permanent state, one fully achievable in this life. Indeed, Boyd Taylor Coolman comments that in this text there is little to differentiate the union that the soul attains from beatific vision (2013: 259). Richard appears to hold that the final stage of love involves human willing being entirely subsumed within God's own willing, a position reinforced by the teaching mission on which the soul finally embarks, which is described as giving birth. Richard employs nuptial imagery to explicate a fourfold movement through the levels of love from engagement, to marriage, through sexual union, to spiritual pregnancy: 'In the first degree a betrothal is made, in the second a marriage, in the third sexual union, in the fourth childbirth' (4.26; Kraebel 2012: 286).

The idea that a complete union of wills occurs by means of love is discussed in a more structured theological sense in the same period by William of St Thierry (c.1085–1147/8), who joined the Cistercian Order late in life, having previously been a Benedictine abbot (Bell 1984). William stresses with great intensity that to love God is to become part of the love through which God loves God's self. It is to share, in an incomprehensible way, in the love which is the Holy Spirit, who, for William, is the 'substantial union' between the Father and the Son. It is thus to know God as God knows God's self. As he states, 'It is one thing to recognize God as a man recognizes his friend, another to recognize Him as He recognizes himself... the recognition which is mutual to the Father and Son is the very unity of both, which is the Holy Spirit' (William of St Thierry, *Mirror* 15.31; Davis 1979: 75).

William often closely echoes and builds on Augustine, another of the founding fathers of the Western Christian mystical tradition, whose mystical theology of love was also deeply influential in this period (see Louth 1981: 142ff.; Howells 2010: 95–104). William follows him in accepting that extramission accounts for the way in which love can transform the soul (*Mirror* 15.26–30). Extramission was the scientific theory that in seeing the eyes emit a ray of light that then brings back an impression of an object into the soul. Almost as though the soul were wax, the eyes press this image into the soul. The more one gazes upon an object lovingly, the greater the impression—with the result that what one contemplates with love transforms not only the soul but also the body (since both are connected). William illustrates this by referring to the Old Testament story of how Jacob placed mottled sticks before his sheep when they were mating with the result that the coats of their offspring were tarnished (*Mirror* 15.29; Gen. 30: 37–43). Following

Augustine, William reasons that spiritual sight is an even more powerful form of seeing and so works similarly. As Margaret Miles writes of Augustine:

Just as, in physical vision, the will unifies, in the act of vision, two separate entities—the viewer and the object—so in the vision of God, it is love, ‘a stronger form of the will,’ that, in the activity of loving, connects and unites human longing with God’s activity of love. (Miles 1983: 135)

For William then love is the soul’s ultimate sense, uniting divine and human desire. In accord with Augustine, he does not consider this to be an alien or unnatural process. Rather William stresses that the soul is itself the image of God, evidenced through its capacities to love, know, and remember. Union of divine and human will is thus a process of spiritual anthropological recovery. Equating love with the activity of the Holy Spirit, William can describe the possibility of a most intimate union between God and the soul. In his *Mirror of Faith* he argues that this process cannot be complete in this life. Indeed, in this text he appears more cautious than Richard about the nature of such union. John Arblaster argues that William’s understanding of unity of spirit must nonetheless be seen as radical (*Mirror* 17; Davis 1979: 82; see Arblaster 2015).

These are far from the only theological discussions of the erotic, however, that the twelfth century bequeathed to mystical theology. We have space to consider just one final writer, whose ideas were also deeply influential, Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129) (see McGinn 1996: 328ff.). Rupert, a Benedictine abbot, was also writing within a monastic context (see Curschmann 1988; Diehl 2013; Lipton 2005; Saucier 2012). At the end of his life, in his lesser known *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, he recounts an experience which for him had, years earlier, signalled his call to priestly ministry. One evening, Rupert experienced how, in a dream, Christ called him into a mutual kiss. Walking towards the altar, he witnessed it break in two, allowing him to approach the image of the crucified Christ which hung before him and so kiss Christ on the mouth. As he kisses him, Christ opened his mouth to allow Rupert to kiss him more deeply: ‘I held Him, I embraced Him and kissed Him long and profoundly. I noticed how happily He received this sign of love, for in the kissing, He opened his mouth so that I would kiss Him more deeply’ (Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.383; tr. J. Arblaster). Around thirty days later, whilst in bed, as soon as he closed his eyes, he experienced a presence above him—the figure of a man. He explains how this figure entered into him, penetrating him to his very core in a way that he could not describe:

Above me came something that resembled a man, who bent forward, and stretched himself equally over me. He only hid his face, as much as possible. He came in to me, and filled the whole substance of my soul. He impressed himself in me, in such a way that I cannot express it adequately in words.

(Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.383; tr. J. Arblaster)

These two experiences were the culmination of an earlier one in which God entered Rupert such that he felt a substance moving around within his spiritual womb:

A kind of shining weight of an ineffable substance, a living substance, came down . . . This entered into my breast . . . it woke me up from my sleep . . . soon it began to move, to move in the womb of the inner person . . . This living thing and real life whirled around in a marvellous way. Its circular movement became each time larger than the previous one and much wider. . . swirling inundations occurred, one after the other, until the last stream flew over as a broad stream . . . Then, it turned around and, in circular movements in the other direction, ran out at the left side.

(Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.378–9; tr. J. Arblaster)

From these passages it seems that Rupert experienced a Marian-type annunciation. The Holy Spirit entered into him, copulating with him and causing him to become pregnant. That he describes these events in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, the most liturgical of texts, reinforces that, for Rupert, his priestly role was born out of his union with God. Yet his account suggests a deeper incorporation of physicality into spiritual union than we find in those of Bernard, William, or Richard (also see Arblaster, 2015 on John of Fécamp).

These writers created a legacy of erotic, physical, and unitive love that responded to the cultural issues of their day and which together allowed for an understanding of spiritual love very different to the rarefied eroticism advocated by Origen. It opened the way for sensual discussions of mystical marriage and for erotic encounters with the divine in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries when different cultural issues were being raised and which, as Bernard McGinn has commented, further collapsed the divisions between physical and spiritual knowing that Augustine and Origen had constructed (see McGinn 1998: 155). Interestingly, these developments are mostly found in the writings of women.

EROTIC AND NUPTIAL LOVE: BODY AND SOUL

Rupert experienced God quite physically in his body. Female authors, like Hadewijch, also do so, integrating such experiences firmly into their mystical theologies. We know little about Hadewijch. She was clearly well-educated, with knowledge of secular love literature, for she speaks of the love between the soul and God as *minne*—the term for intense erotic love employed within this genre (see Rudy 2002: 68–9). We can illustrate the intensely physical and erotic nature of her love for God in relation to a vision she experienced when taking communion. Like Rupert, hers too is a liturgical encounter.

As she eats Christ's body and drinks his blood in the eucharist, she has a sense of union with God that is positively orgasmic. Again, as in Rupert's account, God comes to her in the form of man:

[H]e came to me in the form and clothing of a man ... Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in the form of taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. (Hadewijch, Vision 7; Hart 1980: 281)

Although the passage is somewhat atypical in her writing, from this short extract we get a sense of one of the ways that physical and spiritual sensation collapse in Hadewijch's theology. Yet lest we should assume that hers was a theologically unsophisticated response to love, Gordon Rudy stresses that underpinning it is a carefully developed ontology that combines Christological and sacramental awareness:

These Eucharistic passages emphasize how Hadewijch's language of tasting and touching is profoundly Christological, that those born of *minne* [spiritual love] know and are one with God both because they participate ontologically in the nature of *minne* and because they act and sense God in this world in the body, especially in receiving the Eucharist. (Rudy 2002: 94–5)

Indeed, Hadewijch builds on William's idea of 'substantial union' (see Arblaster: 2015), yet extends the sense of connection between soul and body. As Rudy comments, 'Hadewijch observes no strong distinction between matter and spirit, soul and body; she assumes that people know, become like, and can be unified with God as an integrated whole, soul and body' (Rudy 2002: 67). Hadewijch in no sense reduces the language of the Song of Songs to a physical experience, rather we find a complex interplay at work between the rhetoric of experience as theological tool for knowledge of God, as employed by Origen, Bernard, etc., and her sense that body and soul cannot be divided. It is in this nuanced sense—which modern readers, post-Freud, struggle to grasp—that Rudy speaks of Hadewijch having 'a concept of spiritual sensation based on a single human sensorium', that is, one in which physical and spiritual sensation cannot be prised apart (Rudy 2002: 76; also see McGinn, 1995). As Rudy stresses, this somewhat sets Hadewijch apart from the more bodily, imaginative spirituality of which Caroline Walker Bynum writes (Rudy 2002: 73ff.; Bynum 1988: 153–61; Bynum 1991: 190–1; however, see Elliott 2011).

Bynum notes that a more literally embodied sense of union with God finds an outworking in numerous later discussions of mystical marriage written by women. Gertrude of Helfta is a case in point. She speaks of Christ visiting her in the form of a 16-year-old boy. Her encounter is charged with an eroticism redolent of secular love literature, despite being interlaced with scripture:

I heard these words: 'I will save you. I will deliver you. Do not fear.' With this, I saw his hand, tender and fine, holding mine . . . and he added 'With my enemies you have licked the dust (cf. Ps 71.9) and sucked honey among thorns. Come back to me now, and I will inebriate you with the torrent of my divine pleasure.' (Ps. 35.9).

(Gertude of Helfta, *Herald of Divine Love* 2.1; Winkworth 1993: 95)

Similarly, Mechtild of Hackeborn 'envisions Christ lying by her side in bed, holding her with his left arm so that "the wound of his heart was joined so sweetly to her heart"' (Elliot 2011: 179, quoting Mechtild of Hackeborn, *Book of Special Grace* 2.32). Such writings evidence an engagement with the devotional *imitatio Christi* so popular at the time, which Hadewijch appears to eschew (see Arblaster 2015; Arblaster and Faesen 2012). It encouraged one to imagine oneself present at the events of Christ's life and death so as to develop deep affection for Christ's humanity—as Bernard had recommended (see Swanson 1998). An example of how such devotion became conflated with erotic and nuptial theology in later medieval spirituality can be found in the writings of Bridget of Sweden (c.1373) whose mystical marriage appears to be enacted in quite literal terms. God takes her for his wife and states that as his bride she will now be privy to divine secrets. Bridget's account is known to have influenced Margery Kempe (see Yoshikawa 2007: esp. 54ff.), with whose account of mystical union we began.

Whilst fascinating in and of themselves, the question that this chapter set out to consider is whether such ideas have anything to offer to contemporary theology. In conclusion, I would like to offer a few reflections on the potential value of embracing anew some of the theological directions into the erotic that mystical theology opens up.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE EROTIC ANEW?

The mystical theology that I have drawn attention to posits a deep connectivity between God and humanity via erotic love, one essential to human anthropology. Denys Turner believes that as such it offers important theological insight into how we should understand and speak about God (and humanity's relationship to God). Turner holds that one of the attractions of the Song of Songs for medieval theologians was its potential to provide a language through which to proclaim the paradox of God's relationship with humanity: both united and simultaneously Other (Turner 1995b). It is an idea that is indeed fundamental to mystical theology, as this passage from Julian of Norwich makes clear:

And so I understood that man's soul is made of nothing, that is to say that it is made of nothing that is made, . . . to the making of man's soul he would accept nothing at

all, but made it. And so created nature is rightfully united to the maker, who is substantially uncreated nature, that is God.

(Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, LT 53; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 284; also see Faesen 2012)

Here Julian argues that when one sees one's relationship with God aright, one realizes that nothing separates the soul from God, even though an essential distinction between Creator and creature nonetheless remains. Talk of erotic union aided understanding of how this paradox could work and helped medieval authors to stress the centrality of love to all human–divine relations. Thus, contrary to Anders Nygren who argued that this corrupted Christian agapic love by confusing it with Platonic ideas of eros, Turner argues that in fact it lends Christian discourse about God a philosophical sophistication that it would have otherwise lacked (Nygren 1932–9). Contrary to later writers such as Jean Gerson (1363–1429) medieval exegetes saw no conflict between the language of union and human freedom:

Unless we understand such language... as deliberately paradoxical, as striving, through paradox, to combine in equal measure the apparently opposed, then it collapses into sheer unintelligibility—or, more commonly, it is read as exhibiting an excessive, perhaps even an obsessively morbid, emphasis on the union of the lover and the beloved, at the expense of human identity and the freedom of the soul's own agency. (Turner 1995b: 61; see Gerson 1969)

The two did not compete. Erotic desire, Turner stresses, held them in paradoxical tension—just as it does in the most intense human relationships, such as when in *Wuthering Heights* Cathy declares that she *is* Heathcliffe (Turner 1995b: 64).

Turner, however, is deeply suspicious of the more experiential medieval responses to the erotic we have discussed. He views this 'experiential turn' as a denigration of mystical theology proper, one whereby it loses the capacity to fully maintain the paradox of both God's immanence and transcendence (thereby misunderstanding the spiritual nature of eroticism). As he states in his *Darkness of God*,

This mediaeval tradition of 'mysticism' conceived of as the moment of negativity immanent with the ordinary practice, theoretical and moral, of the Christian life, disappears when the dialectic is detached from the metaphoric, leaving the metaphoric discourse stranded, as it were, in isolation, minus its underpinning hierarchy of ontology and epistemology. (Turner 1995a: 272)

Alexandra Barratt arrives at a similar conclusion in her assessment of Margery, arguing that one cannot describe her spirituality as mystical or even theologically sound. Barratt cannot accept that the seemingly fantastical eroticism we find in Margery's experiences of God leads to an actual encounter with the Transcendent. To her mind, it does nothing but bear witness to a selfish tendency in much late-medieval devotion: '[n]arcissism and despair are more likely to result from this kind of spiritual exercise than self-knowledge

and repentance' (Barratt 1998: 58). Many modern readers may also find Margery's account at best childish; for as we saw Margery collapses spiritual marriage into its literal counterpart, imagining God the Father taking her by the hand and reciting marriage vows, 'for richer, for poorer', whilst Mary and the saints look on approvingly.

Yet while in no sense denying the theological richness of Turner's reading of medieval Song of Songs commentary, in isolating eroticism from notions of experience it seems to me that both Turner and Barratt risk painting erotic and nuptial theology as little more than metaphorical God-talk with strong ontological overtones. Whilst medieval discourse of erotic love arguably depends on and thus guarantees a sense of otherness between the protagonists, it seems unclear what this medieval counterpart really has to say to a Jean-Luc Marion, except in pointing out that his Other depends on the self in ways that medieval authors would have found unacceptable and vice versa (see Jeanrond 2010: 155ff.; Citot and Godo 200: 6; Marion 2007). Conversely and perhaps surprisingly, medieval theologies of love that risk a carnal, bodily, and experiential engagement are, I believe, redolent with possibilities for twenty-first century theology, or at least this is what I will briefly argue.

Western contemporary society is becoming bored with the overt carnality that has filtered into almost every facet of life. *Playboy Magazine* recently announced that from now on its models will be partially clothed; overt nudity replaced with the subtle and gauche in order that fantasy and imagination might be re-engaged (*Metro Belgique* (FR) 14 Oct. 2015: 6). Surprisingly, mystical texts, especially those written by women in the later Middle Ages, argue for an analogous position: the importance of engaging one's imagination, but doing so without descending into fantasy. They promote a wise imagination, which is 'the presence of the spirit of God, [as] the best possible guide that man or woman can have' to borrow a phrase from George MacDonald (1895: 28); one that holds onto the hope that within the human psyche there lies the possibility of reinvesting sacred value in all of creation, but particularly in the female form. Margery Kempe's mystical marriage may, on the one hand, seem fantastical, indicating a desire to be loved in a manner not present in her earthly marital circumstances. Yet there is not perhaps anything terribly wrong with that, if the hope onto which she holds is that she is loved body and soul by her Creator, whom she cannot know except in so far as she comes to love herself. To suggest that this would not have been transformational for Margery, as Barratt does, seems short-sighted (however, see Salih 2017).

This is not, however, to deny that Barratt is right to assert that medieval spirituality should nonetheless be approached with caution. Much late medieval devotion revels in an almost pornographic violence, replete with anti-Semitism. Julie Miller argues that the metaphorical use of this imagery in female-authored texts at times comes close to embracing a God who willingly overpowers an unsuspecting woman in a manner disturbingly redolent of late-medieval justifications of rape; an idea that must be railed against (Miller 1999). However, in claiming this Miller has in mind a writer like Hadewijch, who, as we have seen, operates with a rhetorical and theological sophistication that pushes beyond such horrific understandings of union. Margery certainly encounters no such God. God will not take her as his wife without her consent. Her God

is a modern man, abreast of new legislation that invalidated any ‘marriage’ laid claim to as a consequence of forced union. Indeed, Margery’s God was one who gave her hope that, despite all the consequences of her marital situation, she was and always would be pure and holy and totally worthy of both spiritual and physical pleasure, a state evidenced in after-effects that manifest themselves in her body as well as her spirit: ‘for she felt many comforts, both spiritual comforts and bodily comforts’ (Windeatt 1985: 124). The very immanence and experientialism of her imaginative encounter with the erotic was precisely what allowed Margery to understand love as suprahuman and so transcendent, setting her on a deeply Bernardine path.

Thus, although the contemporary atheist philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims that nothing can overcome our cravings—that in a sense we are hopelessly lost in an erotic narrative of our own making—medieval mystical theology begs to differ (Žižek 1999). Medieval mystical theology posits God as the never-ending end point of all our hungry desires; limitless enough to allow us to endlessly seek. It is a point that both Richard of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux make in describing the highest form of spiritual love as ‘insatiable’ (Richard of St Victor, *Four Degrees of Violent Love*; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* 11.33) and one which Bernard clearly ties to carnality in a way which perhaps only a Margery can make accessible to contemporary Western audiences, who seem desperately in need of the possibility that erotic love might in some sense also be sacred and transformational. Indeed, late-medieval society held that it was only from a position of imaginative devotion that one could start to the climb towards any sense that love could lead beyond the seen and understood, to what the *Cloud*-author calls: ‘This blind impulse of love towards God for himself alone, this secret love beating on this cloud of unknowing’ (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 9; Walsh 1981: 139).

There is much more that could be said about the contemporary possibilities held out by the erotic and nuptial found within mystical theology. The purpose of this chapter has been to open up these possibilities and explain why both the erotic and the nuptial hold such a key place within mystical theology. Despite certain dangers, ‘The mystical discourse of love... shows that the erotic and the sacred need not be understood in terms of radical opposition’ (Jeanrond 2010: 18). On the contrary, there is much to be gained by reinvesting in the erotic following a mystical lead.

SUGGESTED READING

Burrus and Keller (2006); Jeanrond (2010); McGinn (1992); Turner (1995b).

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CHAPTER 18

CATAPHASIS, VISUALIZATION, AND MYSTICAL SPACE

DAVID ALBERTSON

Quid dicit aliquis cum de te dicit? Et vae tacentibus de te, quoniam loquaces muti sunt.

What does anyone really say, when they speak of You? Yet woe to those who speak nothing of You, remaining silent, even as they chatter away.

(Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones* 1.4(4))

CATAPHATIC MYSTICISM: HOW NOT TO AVOID SPEAKING OF IT

SCHOLARLY approaches to mystical theology have undergone two major changes over the last few decades. The first is a new appreciation of the distinctively visual qualities of visionary mysticism, particularly among medieval women writing in the vernacular (e.g. Hamburger 1998; Hamburger and Bouché 2005). Historians of Christian mysticism, informed by developments in art history, no longer confine themselves to the axis running from text to experience, but now attend to the visual forms or visual cultures that co-produce the text, through images depicted narratively or rendered in paint or ink. A second trend is the surprising resonance between deconstruction and negative theology (Hart 1989; Wolfson 2014). Continental philosophers have begun to borrow strategies from Jewish and Christian apophatic traditions for naming the limits of language and challenging onto-theologies of presence (e.g. Derrida 1992; Marion 2002, 2015). Given their monastic and scholastic origins, apophatic texts are often, though not always, written by men; in place of visual forms, they promise a more luminous darkness (Sells 1994).

Both of these trends are welcome developments that confirm the continuing relevance of Christian mystical theologies (Louth 2012; Hamburger 2012). But once juxtaposed, they present new questions and perhaps new hazards. Apophatic mysticism promises to clear away idolatrous speech about God and often promotes an ideal of imageless contemplation, as in Evagrius Ponticus, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Meister Eckhart. But then how should we understand its contrary, cataphatic mysticism? Does the positivity of cataphasis possess its own legitimacy, or should it always be superseded? We ought not to oppose the two traditions as if they were competitors, but neither should we fail to notice when one is elevated above the other. Most of all, we should avoid the temptation to define cataphatic mysticism passively, as the inverse or remainder—the negation—left over in the wake of more prestigious apophatic traditions.

Yet defining the positivity of cataphatic traditions and their legitimacy is more difficult than it seems, and not only for the diversity of its membership, from quiet Benedictines to revolutionary beguines. For example, is the essence of cataphatic theology its semantic form, either as predicative speech, or as exoteric church doctrine? Or does it rather concern different modes of visibility in mystical experience? Does cataphasis proceed from an aesthetic preference for images, the priority of iconophilia over iconoclasm? Or should one simply identify cataphasis with affect, and therefore apophasis with intellect? Each of these categories might denote some historical instances of cataphatic mysticism over against apophatic. But they also entangle us in false binaries rooted in medieval political structures of gender and literacy: visible/invisible, exoteric/esoteric, novice/expert, surface/depth, emotion/intellect—and ultimately, female/male.

Any account of the cataphatic mystical tradition must begin with the vivid profusion of images that fill its texts. Such visual experiences typically originate within the contemplative's pictorial imagination; if they survive into our present, they have been recorded in media that allow their preservation, communication, and renewed contemplation in narrative accounts or graphic expressions. Yet we should never approach such visions as if they were flat images that simply predicate something of God. Nor, as Jeffrey Hamburger has rightly observed, are they merely 'crutch or stimulant for those otherwise unable to do without' (Hamburger 1998: 114). Certainly, in some cases mystical images devolve into allegorical representation or mere illustration. But the magisterial mystical authors, particularly the series of august female mystics in the Middle Ages, should be compared less to painters on canvas than to pioneers in space travel. The most creative mystical authors not only record their travels throughout virtual spaces but invent or discover new topographies altogether, terrains that we usually call visionary experiences. But to state the obvious, such visions have visual content because they first take place in or as imaginal spaces. The mystic's description of what she has seen provides the sole map of that space's topography. The resulting map might be visual—might even be a flat picture inked into the manuscript page—but more significantly, it bears witness to a dynamic spatial realm that has encroached on human experience from elsewhere.

Topoi in Christian mysticism are commonly spatial in character. Immediacy with God in mystical union, God dwelling within the inner self, the interior withdrawal from

the exterior world, the ascent to God through stepwise stages, breaking-through into an abyssal ground: each of these images relies upon a virtual but definite dimensionality of experience, shaped by distances and boundaries that configure the soul into specific relations of proximity with God and the world. Christian mystical texts are replete with imaginary spatialized landscapes and architectures: mountains, deserts, oceans, clouds, chasms, walls, gardens, and castles. Indeed, the modern genre of Christian ‘mysticism’ could simply be re-envisioned as a species of religious literature that creates, invents, or discovers exceptional, transfinite spaces, spaces that manifest God or even arise within God. Cataphasis is to apophasis as speech is to silence, or light to darkness. But before either linguistic or visual registers there is the prior register of figural space, in the primary sense of *ta mustika* or *mustikós*: the hidden that opens into disclosure. As Carmel Bendon Davis writes, if cataphasis is taken as ‘a filling of the distance between God and the self, and negative mysticism as the emptying of the distance between God and the self, then the filled and the emptied space become the same thing because both enable access to God’ (Davis 2008: 109).

In what follows I suggest that we might evade the riddles that beset definitions of cataphatic mysticism by shifting the discussion onto a different terrain. Rather than conceive the visual data of cataphasis as inert media, elementary predications, or naïve experiences—in a word, as passive subjects that invite their own negation—we should instead ground its distinctive legitimacy in subjective practices of active visualization. In short, the positivity of cataphasis is the positive construction of a visual projection. These practices of visualization effectively fashion virtual spaces, which in turn require imaginal mapping, annotation, and navigation. In this way, cataphatic mystical theology becomes a kind of topology or cartography of visualized mystical space. I will first review some historical reasons for approaching cataphatic mysticism in these terms. Then I test the utility of the model by applying it to two works by Hildegard of Bingen, an exemplary cataphatic mystical theologian.

CONSECRATING IMAGES AND CONSTRUCTING SPACE

Art historians of the past confined their analysis to aesthetic responses engendered by different images. But as David Freedberg has argued, scholars should attend to a wider range of more common and immediate reactions to images, visceral responses that often bleed into religious attractions and repulsions (Freedberg 1991). Images incite desire, hatred, fear, and worship; they summon deities and emperors; they deliver prayers and curses; they arouse; they invite their own destruction. Certain images radiate such power that they demand rituals to be performed on their behalf. Ceremonies of washing, anointing, or blessing all activate the potential of images, recognizing a vital presence already within them and enhancing it through ritual performance. Hindu

icons are laved with milk and honey; the eyes of Buddhist icons are opened with needles, or cautiously painted last. Ancient Egyptians concealed the names of the gods inside their statues' bodies to summon the divine presence. Christian relics and icons are garlanded with gold and flowers, blessed with incense, kissed and processed. It is the active construction of images, and the ritual production of living icons, that makes visual media an effective vehicle for communing with the divine (Freedberg 1991: 83–98, 137–8).

Votive images operate in a similar way. The person healed by the god gives thanks by constructing an image memorializing his salvation, usually an icon of the healed bodily member. In his study of ancient Christian votives, Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck analysed the process of image consecration into three rhetorical components: *praesentatio*, *promulgatio*, and *dedicatio*. First, the consecrator designates the image as memorial by recounting the miraculous event. Next, that status is ritually celebrated by garlanding, processing, washing, and enshrining. Finally, the image's efficacy is confirmed in its power through a public, verbal act. This consecratory sequence has remained remarkably stable over time and space (Kriss-Rettenbeck 1972: 273–306, 347–59).

The same ensemble of actions—presenting, promulgating, and confirming an image—is found in Christian visionary mysticism as well. In mystical works, the pictorial or discursive image is constructed as a vehicle for communion with God. But the image does not announce itself. If left alone in simple juxtaposition with text, the image will devolve into allegory: it will be reduced hermeneutically to the semantic content of the text. But the most evocative works of visionary mysticism include a third element besides the zone of the image and the voice of the text. This third dimension is precisely the moment of the image being presented, promulgated, and dedicated as an image with special theographic qualities. Like any other religious image, mystical visions never take place in two dimensions, but must be staged, set in motion, and configured within the coordinates of real or virtual spaces.

We might call this integrated consecratory process the 'staging' of the image in the mystical work. It is not the image itself, nor the didactic text, but the figurative space in which the image's consecration and animation, unfolding from the experience of the author, appears in its own trajectory, takes on its own movement, and assumes its own dimensions. Staged images, images that occupy virtual space, are those that best deserve to be called cataphatic, or rather to inspire cataphatic theologies, which explicate, navigate, or delineate the terrain of the spatial image thus staged. It is as if the consecratory staging first provides the projectional space in which the otherwise flat image can now be traversed. This is the difference between the cataphasis that is merely predicative or allegorical, confined to predictable doctrinal categories, and the cataphasis that is truly spatial, or liturgical.

Needless to say, this fundamental topology of mystical discourse differs from the universal, mathematically measured space established in seventeenth-century philosophy and natural science (Koyré 1957). Mystical space is not an unchanging grid of fixed coordinates; it is by nature plural, contingent, and historically mediated. In a word, its construction is not geometric, but poetic. Yet the virtual space traversed in cataphasis

does possess its own geometric character, if we can still countenance an earlier sense of 'world measure' that persists in Christian mystical literature regardless of the quantification of imaginal space. In some pre-modern theological traditions, the act of image construction is equivalent to the act of spatial projection. In these approaches, crafting images of divine realities is tantamount to measuring distances between the self and God, or tracing the contours of sacred and profane worlds. These too are geometrical tasks.

For example, the great Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa, envisions humanity as a living, natural image of God that progresses into ever-greater likeness through contemplation. But for Gregory contemplation is not simply ascent but rather an infinite passage into the measureless depths of God, like an arrow that once launched never ceases travelling. To be created is nothing other than to be ontologically spaced (*diastasis*, *parastasis*), separated from God by virtue of non-identity. Yet one is therefore opened onto the very spatial difference (*diastéma*) that enables that infinite journey into the divine depths (Balthasar 1995: 27–35).

When the Syrian monk John of Damascus defended Christian icons, he construed the visuality of the Jesus-image in terms of its geometrical space. The incarnation takes a definite place within the world and is known through its linear contours. Hence for John the validity of icons stands or falls with the status of *perigraphēin*, delineation or circumscribability. In the incarnation, the invisible is visualized, but equally, the uncontainable is contained, and the uncircumscribable is circumscribed. John is fascinated by the spatial quality of the paradox, and on a handful of occasions even articulates it explicitly, as if he recognized the face of Jesus as a geometrical phenomenon: 'How could the non-extensive, non-quantitative, unbounded and formless be drawn?' (*Divine Images* 3.8; Kotter 1975: 81). When John states that the divine Word remains 'without quantity' (*apotos*) and 'without magnitude' (*apélikos*), he has chosen two technical terms from geometry in Plato, Aristotle, and Nicomachus of Gerasa. John even suggests that the kenosis of incarnation in Philippians 2 does not only designate the humility of human flesh but also its mathematical dimensions: 'taking the form of a slave, by this reduction to quantity and magnitude' (*Divine Images* 3.8; Kotter 1975: 82).

Neoplatonist philosophers in the late Athenian school, Iamblichus and Proclus, also equated visualization practices with the construction or projection of figural space. Theurgical rites in Iamblichus move through several stages, from material offerings that liberate the soul to noetic offerings that divinize it (Shaw 2003: 171–82). The content of noetic theurgies is mathematical objects: numbers, harmonies, and geometrical shapes. Since soul is a self-moving number, mathematical operations are also psychic operations that deliver the soul into higher realms. For Iamblichus, geometry is the purest visual animation of the soul's own journey from multiplicity to unity. By projecting geometrical forms into space, the soul returns to itself through the unification of the seeing subject and the objects seen (Shaw 2003: 215–19).

In the next century, Proclus addressed similar ideas in his commentary on Euclid's *Elements*. The soul generates geometrical forms as 'projections' (*probolai*) of eternal

patterns within it. The imagination is like a writing tablet never empty and always self-inscribing (*Commentary on Euclid*, prol. 1.6; Morrow 1970: 11–15). But imagination necessarily casts everything into the medium of extension, translating into spatial figures or shapes. In the intellect, a circle is unextended, without magnitude, and invisible; but in imagination, the soul projects the circle onto the screen of visibility, unrolling pure forms into space so that the intellect can visualize them for the first time (*Commentary on Euclid*, prol. 2.1; Morrow 1970: 42–5). Through such geometrical diagramming (*anagraphein*), the soul comes to know herself:

the soul, exercising her capacity to know, projects on the imagination, as on a mirror, the ideas of the figures; and the imagination, receiving in pictorial form these impressions of the ideas within the soul, by their means afford the soul an opportunity to turn inward from the pictures and attend to herself. . . . When the soul is looking outside herself at the imagination, seeing the figures depicted there and being struck by their beauty and orderedness, she is admiring her own ideas from which they are derived. . . . (*Commentary on Euclid*, def. 14; Morrow 1970: 113)

Inventing novel spaces is not a fantastical or poetic enterprise; on the contrary, it is a precise and certain mode of knowledge. Proclus suggests that visualization practices are not only occasions for superior self-knowledge, but also for theological speculation. The gods possess the highest knowledge of the spatial figures (*schémata*) that orient the viewer toward divine forms (*Commentary on Euclid*, def. 14; Morrow 1970: 112). To imagine new architectures of figural space therefore leads one into deeper communion with the gods. The constructed quality of such visual landscapes is not a sign of irreality. Rather, the very virtuality of such ‘living figures’ allows the viewer to contemplate the forms of the gods themselves.

Ignatian spirituality has always possessed a positive theory of image construction and image response since the founding of the Society of Jesus in the sixteenth century. For Ignatius Loyola, contemplative prayer is tantamount to visual projection by the imagination. In the *Spiritual Exercises* he directs readers to craft detailed, iconic spaces that they can travel through in their mind’s eye, a task he calls the ‘composition of place’ or ‘imaginary construction’ (*Exercitia Spiritualia* 151; Dalmases 1969: 250). This first stage of Ignatian prayer is nothing more than rendering and navigating such spaces, observing landmarks, measuring dimensions, inhabiting the terrain. Specific compositions revolve around the life of Jesus, such as the synagogues and villages he visited, the architecture of the holy sepulchre, or the furnishings of Mary’s residence.

Ignatius distinguishes between two kinds of spatial construction. If the object of vision is physically visible (*contemplatione vel meditatione visibili*), then one composes the place and gazes on Christ in the given scene. But if the object is an invisible abstraction (e.g. the state of original sin), then one should still resort to imaginative construction to invent a fitting image-space, an objective correlative (e.g. exile in a valley of tears among wild beasts) (*Exercitia Spiritualia* 47; Dalmases 1969: 185–7). Both are equally *compositiones loci*; both equally utilize the ‘eye of the imagination’. This suggests

that Ignatius has disregarded the difference between representational virtual space based on narrative (the road to Emmaus) and a fabricated virtual space concocted by the contemplative (a valley of tears). Whether something is 'imaginary' matters little in this framework. What matters instead is the real effectivity of the spatial construction itself, irrespective of its origins, including the soul's attention to its dimensions, the sensory and emotional response produced while inhabiting the virtual realm, and of course the lasting moral effects on the soul.

Ignatius enjoins the exercitant not only to imagine a given scene, but to measure its spatial contours. When envisioning the punishments of Hell, the *compositio loci* first amounts to 'imagining the length, breadth, and depth,' and only thereafter to hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching its gruesome features (*Exercitia Spiritualia* 65; Dalmases 1969: 201). The bare geometry opens up a determinate realm for the senses to probe. When envisioning Christ's birth, one begins by mapping the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem; upon arriving at the holy birthplace, the cartographic duties continue (*Exercitia Spiritualia* 112; Dalmases 1969: 228). The same process recurs in the Passion as the praying spectator accompanies Christ from Bethany to Jerusalem. First the contemplative measures the span of the road and graphs the dimensions of the empty room for the Last Supper; and only then does she hear Christ and respond in colloquy, layering sensations and prayers upon the bare geometrical space (*Exercitia Spiritualia* 192–8; Dalmases 1969: 280–3).

For good reason, then, some scholars have begun to apply spatial theory to understand Christian mystical theologies. Mette Birkedal Brunn has described Bernard of Clairvaux's exegetical practices as a kind of 'cartography' or 'spiritual topography' that approaches the scriptures not only as sacred history but as sacred space (Bruun 2007: 19–44). As she observes, 'mapping involves two sets of interpretative actions: the fabrication (encoding) and reading (decoding) of the map' (Bruun 2007: 20). In our terms, the constative 'decoding' by cataphatic mysticism is a cartographic step that follows secondarily upon the initial 'encoding' of space, the construction of the original 'spiritual topography' itself. Contemporary theologians have also begun to explore the significance of mathematical, architectural, and liturgical senses of space (respectively: Pickstock 1998: 47–70; Gorringe 2002: 26–49; and Lacoste 2004: 7–39). They typically rely on the spatial theories of Martin Heidegger (2002), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Michel Foucault (1986).

Carmel Bendon Davis has explored the connections between mysticism and space in her study of medieval English mysticism (Davis 2008). Davis attends, for example, to the negative presence of Julian's dimensionless 'point,' or the empty, indefinite extension of the 'Cloud' of unknowing (Davis 2008: 127–40, 182–208). Her discussion follows the materialist spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre, who emphasized the functional interdependence of spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces—physical, social, and textual spaces. She also employs Michel Foucault's notion of 'heterotopias' as alternative social realms that suspend, and thereby reveal, the power structures of ordinary spaces. Davis even speculates that the interplay between apophatic and cataphatic mysticism is a necessary, spatial dialectic. God is contained by

the soul (affirmation); and the soul is contained by God (negation). This insight is more helpful for defining cataphasis than when Davis conflates it with affective mysticism or scholastic philosophy (Davis 2008: 106–9).

Yet mystical spaces might be better approached through philosophers other than Lefebvre and Foucault. Gaston Bachelard's masterful *The Poetics of Space* offers a valuable alternative to consider (Bachelard 1994). Rejecting the Cartesian 'cancerization' of space by geometry, Bachelard begins from a 'topophilic' premise. Space is first experienced not as mathematically measured or socially constructed, but rather through poetic images, both visual and intimate. For Bachelard, primordial spaces (the hut, the universe, the self) fundamentally protect the thinker, making space for thought to arise. Since the security of their enclosure allows one to sleep and dream, the daydream is the origin of all contemplation, as the principal locus for experiencing space through poetic-oneiric images. Enclosed spaces not only protect; they require opening to unveil what lies hidden inside. One dwells in such spaces, therefore, through what Bachelard calls an 'aesthetics of the hidden', but which one might equally name mystical theologies (Bachelard 1994: 85–9). What are mystical visions, if not revelatory images that arise through oneiric visualization?

Bachelard uses three dialectics to structure his 'topography of intimate being': the interior (self) and the exterior (world); the miniature (sub-geometric) and the immense (super-geometric); and the round (curved) and the flat (linear). In each instance, the first term takes priority. Hence Bachelard focuses particularly upon the 'phenomenology of roundness' that manifests the intimacy of interior space, the space of the dreaming self. Primordial spaces—eggs, nests, chrysalises, shells, corners—are intrinsically round and concave, providing havens in which the poetic imagination can dwell. Once sheltered, they can unfold vast regions of immensity, the exterior world, and linear flat spaces. But these geometrical expanses only arise on the basis of the poetic imagination. 'Inhabited space', writes Bachelard, 'transcends geometrical space', and the space in which one dwells is necessarily round. 'The grace of a curve is an invitation to remain. We cannot break away from it without hoping to return. For the beloved curve has nest-like powers; it incites us to possession, it is a curved "corner," inhabited geometry' (Bachelard 1994: 47, 146).

No one has extrapolated Bachelard's philosophy of roundness more than Peter Sloterdijk in his recent trilogy on 'spheres' (Sloterdijk 2011). For Sloterdijk, to become human is to engage in 'immunological' sphere formation, shaping selves and societies into complex systems of intimacy and interiority. 'Living in spheres', he writes, 'means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. Spheres are immune-systemically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside' (Sloterdijk 2011: 28). Sloterdijk not only demonstrates the enduring value of Bachelardian 'topoanalysis' for engaging contemporary philosophy. He also uncovers significant connections between Bachelard's poetics of roundness and a range of topics in Christian mystical theology, from Genesis, angels, mariology, and eucharist, to the spatial theories of Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: STATIC ENCLOSURES

To see how cataphatic mystical theologies operate in practice, let us look more closely at a single exemplary author. The twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, is not only one of the pre-eminent female visionaries of the Middle Ages, but also one of its most prolific and innovative mystical theologians whose works are exclusively cataphatic (McGinn 2000). It comes as no surprise to find that Hildegard constructs and explores a variety of mystical spaces across her works, but we can focus on two in particular. The twenty-six visions of *Scivias* (1151) range from irregular mountain formations to her famous cosmic egg, from architectural monuments to anthropomorphic figures. But in *Scivias* Hildegard interprets the spatiality of the visions allegorically and rather statically (Liebeschütz 1964; cf. Dronke 1998). By the time of *Liber divinorum operum* (1174), however, Hildegard has subtly altered her methods. Now she animates a single visual complex that unfurls in ten interconnected phases. As Hildegard opens each image's internal space, one scene metamorphoses into the next, revealing vistas of the cosmos, the human body, and the avenues of heaven.

To begin with, we should note the spatial character of Hildegard's visionary events themselves (cf. Newman 2005). Hildegard recounts her subjective experiences in prologues to each work that share common features. A light from heaven overwhelms her mind and commands her to write; she receives authorization as theologian without formal scriptural education; and she remains lucid while her visual apparatus is overtaken. But there is another theme implied in each of the testimonies. Hildegard's visionary revelations are always episodes of travel and disclosure, an opening of, or an entrance into, novel and definite virtual spaces. Twice in her preface to *Scivias* Hildegard states that her visions do not consist in fanciful inventions, but in being transferred into an alternative but nonetheless objective spatial realm: she 'saw, heard, and perceived . . . in the heavens through the secret mysteries of God' (*Scivias*, prot. 94–6; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 3, 6, ll. 12–21). The wakeful vision arrives, she explains, not in the 'ecstasy' of exterior senses, as if in 'hidden places' (*in abditis locis*), but rather in the complete 'filling' (*transfudere*) of her interior sense, in 'open places' (*in apertis locis*) (*Scivias*, prot. 43–7; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 4, ll. 27–9). This conjunction of interiority and openness in Hildegard's account indicates the arrival of, or rather her delivery into, an unfamiliar space. Likewise in the later prologue of *Liber*, Hildegard states that she was not 'in ecstasy' but 'perceived in the secret heavens' (*Liber*, prol. 37–40; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 46). This perception of hidden heavenly space, she states, is tantamount to 'being permeated by the depth of the mysteries of God' (*profunditate misteriorum Dei perfusa*) (*Liber*, prol. 16–17; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 45). With body and mind intact, she passes into the infinite openness of God.

These qualities of her visionary experience are confirmed in her famous letter to Guibert of Gembloux in 1175. There Hildegard clarifies that the living light 'is not bound by space . . . there is nothing in it to recognize of height, length or breadth. . . . I am not able to perceive the shape of this light, just as I could not perfectly see the sphere of the sun' (*Epistola*, CIIIR; Van Acker 1993: 261–2, ll. 78–80, 95–6; tr. Hart 1990: 18–19, modified). This trans-spatial light not only elevates her to heaven but also 'expands' (*dilatare*) to embrace different locales at varying distances simultaneously (*Epistola*, CIIIR; Van Acker 1993: 261, ll. 65–8). Hildegard does not say that the light is non-spatial, but that its space is not bound by definite contours as if it were a discrete object. Rather the 'light' is a measureless virtual realm concealed behind or within the topography of ordinary experience.

The centrality of spatial categories to Hildegard's visionary experience makes sense in light of the theological anthropology she outlines at the end of *Liber divinorum operum*. Just as the naked human body is covered in clothing, she explains, so the created universe is the clothing of divine Wisdom: 'God cannot be seen but is known through the divine creation, just as our body cannot be seen because of our clothing' (*Liber*, pars III, visio quarta, c. XIII [= 3.4.14]; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 404, ll. 19–21; tr. Fox 1987: 220). Hildegard's analogy of containment or enclosure is deceptively simple. The image implies that God abides within cosmic space, but also that the bare human form imitates divine Wisdom. This entails not only that human interiority is the image of divine interiority, but also that human bodies 'enclose' Wisdom within themselves. As Hildegard reasons:

When we were formed, God enclosed (*clausare*) within us hidden mysteries because we were made in the divine likeness with respect to knowing, thinking, and doing. The Divinity possessed in itself the ordering of the entire work of salvation, as well as its method of achievement, and created the human species such that we could likewise think. We were meant to speak all our works within our heart that we were going to carry out. And thus the human species is a place of enclosure (*clausura*) for God's wondrous deeds.

(*Liber*, 3.4.14; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 404, ll. 51–8; tr. Fox 1987: 221, modified)

Hildegard's image has several layers. First, God's providential Wisdom is equivalent to the self-enclosure of a hidden plan, possessed inside itself. 'Wisdom' means an interior space that unfolds from hiddenness to expression. Since humanity is created in God's image, the same interiority marks our species, when we deliberate by speaking within our hearts. Finally Hildegard proposes that the interior human space inscribes not only human deeds, but divine deeds, the secret mysteries of Wisdom—above all, the plan to incarnate Godself into that very human form thus created.

The human body therefore is a doubly profound space that encloses within itself the depths of Providence—depths which are none other than the hidden inhabiting of human form, eternally ordained by God in the incarnation. The secret destiny of

the human species is to enclose the unenclosable creator. At the most extreme point of the paradox, Mary's womb, humanity becomes an enclosure that remains open to the Open enclosing itself (cf. Newman 1987: 156–81). One can scarcely conceive a superior instance of Bachelard's 'phenomenology of roundness' or Sloterdijk's 'immunological spheres'.

The spatial figure of enclosure reappears in several of Hildegard's visions in *Scivias* (for images, see Saurma-Jeltsch 1998). In the first vision, the Voice commands Hildegard to instruct weak Christians with the confidence of a divine mandate, that is, to 'unlock for them the enclosure (*clausura*) of mysteries that they, timid as they are, conceal in a hidden and fruitless field' (*Scivias*, pars I, visio prima [= 1.1]; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 8, ll. 36–7; tr. Hart 1990: 67). If Hildegard's authorial mission is to reveal what she has seen, then her visions are fundamentally *clausurae* in need of opening. This accounts for a feature common to the majority of visions in *Scivias*: their anthropomorphic orientation. Nearly every virtual landscape seen by Hildegard includes prominent human figures of unusual size, colour, age, or anatomy. She draws attention to the bodies of women and children, to human organs, and especially to the womb, the organ of enclosed space par excellence. When Hildegard exegetes her visions, she typically combines different registers: theological observations about Jesus's body, scientific accounts of human physiology (often reproductive), and ethical instruction about the proper uses of the body in light of the Church's redemption.

Hildegard's hermeneutical methods in *Scivias*, however, rarely move beyond allegory. She stages multiple virtual spaces in her visions, one per chapter, and then tours their features to interpret their significance. Each vision is analysed into discrete images that receive a single theological or ethical meaning. Largely speaking, Hildegard's readings in *Scivias* ignore the distinctive dimensionality of her visions as projected spaces. Instead, images culled from those spaces are reduced to colour, brightness, or shape, as if simple signs to be decoded. Often the images are sufficiently transparent to render their decryption superfluous, such as her vision of circles of angels, or vision of Christ on the cross.

For example, In Vision 3.1, Hildegard sees a divine figure seated on a throne. A 'great circle' of immeasurable magnitude extends from the throne, shining with golden light; it extends into every cardinal direction and is constantly turning (*gyrans*) from one to the next (*Scivias* 3.1; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 328, ll. 49–51). Its breadth (*amplitudo*) encompasses even heaven and hell, so that its full span (*altitudo*) from height to depth cannot be perceived (*Scivias*, 3.1; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 328, ll. 57–60). But in her commentary Hildegard has little to say about the theological meaning of this remarkable geometry, massive but by no means infinite. The amplitude of the circle denotes God's incomprehensible goodness and power enclosing every creature. The throne is the Father, the Son the circle, its golden light the Spirit. The circle's rotation marks the unending time of divine Providence (*Scivias* 3.1.9–13; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 338–41).

Nevertheless, a few sequences in *Scivias* do attend to the spatiality of the visions themselves. In Vision 2.3, Hildegard sees a titanically large 'image' (*imago*) of a crowned woman, whose 'womb was pierced like a net with many openings.' The woman has no

legs or feet but perches on an immense altar monument, as multitudes run in and out of her womb-sieve. In order to give birth, the woman does not pass children out of the womb. Rather, this 'image spreads out (*expandit*) its splendor like a garment', as she draws individuals up into the womb, then into her head, before passing them out of her mouth (*Scivias* 2.3, Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 134–5, ll. 69–70, 83–4). As the perforated womb-space expands and contracts, this spatial movement is the crucial aspect of the image, not its colour, garment, or its words. Tellingly, Hildegard persists in calling the womb 'this image', and not, say, this woman or this mother. Not only is the image essentially its space; that space and its particular configuration stand as an icon of Marian enclosure and the sanctifying operations of the Church (Newman 1987: 196–238). Readers soon learn from Hildegard that the net-womb evokes Christ's miraculous fishing in the Gospels. The image 'expands' (*expandere*) to designate the multiplication of the sacraments through the Church's distribution (*dilatate*): a virtual spatial metaphor for a real spatial activity. The bearing of children through the head and mouth represents virgin birth and spiritual circumcision—both of which preserve the spatial integrity of reproductive organs (*Scivias* 2.3.4–12; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 138–42).

Hildegard's most famous spatial image in *Scivias* arrives in Vision 1.3, when she compares the cosmos to an egg (*similitudo ovi*). The tremendous roundness (*maximum rotundum*) of its interior is lit by a mobile, fiery orb that casts light into cavernous shadows but also propels violent winds inside the egg (*Scivias* 1.3; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 40–1). Suspended within this space are layers of ether and water surrounding an earthen sphere at the core. After delineating her map of the four elements filling the cosmos, Hildegard's visual commentary has two neat parts, one anagogical and one tropological. The egg manifests God the Creator, and the fire and shadow represent the judgement of saved and lost. The brilliant orb is God's Son, the ether is the Church, and the watery layer the grace of baptism. Each visual element is assigned a single verbal meaning.

The next vision (1.4), although a square image, is subtly linked to the cosmic egg, since its four corners stretch to the four parts of the egg-world. Within this square Hildegard witnesses three marvels: the light of a brilliant purple dawn; people carrying milk in buckets to make three grades of cheese; and a woman with the 'perfect human form in her womb'. A fiery 'sphere' inhabits this human form, filling (*transfudere*) and animating it (*Scivias* 1.4; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 61, ll. 50–69). As the fiery sphere travels throughout its body, the human form exits the womb, falls to the earth, but rises again. Given the poetics of the other *Scivias* visions, one would expect an allegorical interpretation of such travails as Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. Yet here instead the reader encounters a lengthy plea or lament, narrated by the same anonymous human figure, whom we learn is a wandering female pilgrim (*Scivias* 1.4.1–3; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 62–7).

The pilgrim's story weaves together elements of Adam's Fall, the captivity in Egypt, the Prodigal Son, and the Passion. The drama she narrates, moreover, is woven into the complex topography traversed in her narrative. The pilgrim is exiled, hunted, and ill,

alone without divine consolation yet seeking her mother Zion, her proper dwelling (*habitare*). Pained by this spatial dislocation, weeping for her lost mother, she retreats along a narrow path to a cave where she smells her mother's fragrance. When she tries to flee the cave, her enemies pursue. She is trapped behind an ocean, blocked by an impassable bridge and mountain range. The memory of the mother strengthens the daughter-pilgrim to venture the narrow path again. When attacked by snakes she takes flight over the valley below, landing within a square tabernacle. She reinforces the architecture to withstand enemy attacks.

Here the plot ends. But now the same female pilgrim proceeds to interpret the first layer of meaning of her own tale. The soul facing temptation must defend the tabernacle of the body by resisting carnal desires (*Scivias* 1.4.4–8; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 67–72). Only after this wandering odyssey does Hildegard's voice return with a second, allegorical exegesis of the original vision, which wanders volubly over topics including the formation of the soul, the faculties of will and intellect, the range of human diversity, and variations in seminal quality (the grades of cheese) (*Scivias* 1.4.9–32; Führkötter and Carlevaris 2003: 72–92). This remarkable fourth vision of *Scivias* not only projects a virtual realm of enclosure (the fiery orb within the human figure), but then interprets this space by a meta-spatial narrative, in which the same spatial figure itself traverses landscapes and architectures on the search for a final enclosure within mother Zion. Just as a literary creation, Hildegard's topographical complexity is stunning.

Visions 1.3 and 1.4 in *Scivias* suggest an integrated sequence, one less significant for its pictorial content than for its dynamic unfolding from one to the next—a visual but also spatial event. Rather than allegorizing these images, Hildegard adds another stratum of visionary space, as the pilgrim searches for Zion. Before the images can be decoded, the visionary space must be inhabited a second time, as the reader retraces the virtual paths, mountains, caves, valleys, and temples of the narrative once again. In other words, simply dwelling within the topography is a legitimate, even primary, mode of mystical commentary. Cataphasis is equivalent to space exploration. Moreover, by virtue of this continuity between Visions 3 and 4, Hildegard constructs a trajectory of contained, enclosed structures: from the egg-womb of the cosmos, to the womb of the Virgin holding Christ, to the womb of mother Zion sought by the pilgrim daughter. Yet there is a surprising lack of references to the incarnation itself, the ground of the womb's valorization as archetypal enclosure. Christology remains barely legible on the surface of the images, let alone the depths.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: DYNAMIC ENCLOSURES

These features of *Scivias* return with greater intensity in *Liber divinorum operum*. By the time she wrote *Liber* two decades later, Hildegard's mysticism has shifted perceptibly into new dimensions. First, Hildegard's visual images have become animated and

enlivened, as her central anthropomorphic figure unfolds continuously into different shapes. Second, at the same time, Hildegard's auto-exegetical attention travels freely throughout all the different regions of those images. This new mobility and depth of field in her visionary experience—the liturgical staging, we could say, that undergirds her cataphatic practice—fulfils the anthropology of enclosure in *Liber divinorum operum* already discussed. For Hildegard now imagines the human creature as herself a space, a capacious vessel who conceals divine marvels within. If the *imago dei* is essentially an encasement or enclosure, then to envision God through God's image is to construct a space, specifically a space with human contours.

This is quite literally what Hildegard proceeds to do in the marvellous images of *Liber divinorum operum*, in which the human form becomes the optimal vehicle for visionary experience (Caviness 1998; Meier 1987). The body's inner geometry proves capable of concealing and revealing layer after layer of superimposed divine orders: Trinity, cosmos, incarnation, microcosmos. The angelic figure that dominates Vision 1 opens itself in Vision 2 to birth the universe hidden within, a reprise of the world-egg from *Scivias*. In Vision 3 the same cosmos opens yet further to reveal that it encloses the human body. Vision 4 measures the world's dimensions using the segmentations of limbs and organs as the primary map. Then in Visions 5–7, Hildegard measures the geography of the earth, the architecture of the heavenly city, and the distributions of the saints. Visions 8–9 explore anthropomorphic figures of the virtues, and Vision 10 reprises the angelic figure from Vision 1 as the 'wheel' of the Eschaton. As in *Scivias*, the incarnation is everywhere implied but nowhere defined—like the centre of an infinite sphere in the old Hermetic riddle. But now the poetics of Hildegard's commentary is less didactic allegory than textual ligature: connecting words of scripture to the delicate tissue of the visions, tying scriptures to each other, and binding the organs of the human body to each.

Much could be written on the first four visions of *Liber*, but we can make a few pertinent observations. Hildegard's initial vision occurs within a divine space 'in the mystery of God', yet at the same time within a physical space 'in the midst of the southern wind' (*Liber* 1.1.1; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 46, ll. 2–6). This strange conflation of realms effectively opens a dimensional space for Hildegard to stage her visionary image. It immediately exceeds the flat plane of images on a screen, since winds move in multiple dimensions. Yet their invisible force, even while they structure the space, yield the visual field completely to the vision itself: a brilliant, beautiful face encircled by a golden ring, from which a second face appears. This suggests that the revelatory human form is doubled through the power of the inscribed circle, a geometry of containment consonant with Hildegard's anthropology of enclosure.

As Hildegard then exegetes her own image, there are several homologies between the space of her vision itself and the divine spatiality described cataphatically. First, the Face belongs to the 'fiery power' of pure divine Life pulsing in the Cosmos. Just as the body 'envelops' (*continet*) the soul, so the universe envelops that Life. Yet the same Life possesses within itself, in turn, the resounding Word that created the world (*Liber* 1.1.2; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 48–9, ll. 15–26). Second, Hildegard returns to the figure

of 'enrobing' with garments (*induere*). Just as the human being in the vision is enrobed, so God robes our souls in bodies and robed Godself in flesh inside Mary. Even the metaphysics of creation conform to the same pattern: the divine ideas are 'enrobed' (*induere*) in forms, and forms are enrobed in corporeal matter (*Liber* 1.1.7; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 52, ll. 7–18; cf. 1.1.12, 1.1.14). Hildegard ends her exposition of Vision 1 praising Mary as the 'enclosed room' (*clausum cubiculum*) where God married humanity by 'dwelling in her enclosure' (*in clatura ipsius habitare*) (*Liber* 1.1.17; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 58, ll. 5–9).

In Vision 2, a wheel of six concentric circles emerges from the breast of the fiery figure of Vision 1. Its body expands to fill Hildegard's entire visual frame, until a second human figure appears at its centre, whose arms and legs stretch to fill the wheel. Hildegard compares this vision self-consciously to the cosmic egg in *Scivias*. But now she conspicuously adopts geometrical language to define its dimensions, as if measuring the contours of the visual space were tantamount to interpreting its theological meaning. Hildegard states more than once that the wheels (*rota*) are not static, planar, and separable, like a diagram, but instead are spheres (*globi*) rotating so closely that each touches the next (*Liber* 1.2.1; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 60–1, ll. 26–39). The meaning of the vision is transparent enough: the stability and integrity of cosmic order reflect the eternity of God. But the spherical shape of the wheel (*circulus*) conveys another cataphatic meaning, from its spatiality alone: 'just as a wheel encloses (*comprehendit*) within itself what lies hidden within it, so also does holy Godhead enclose everything within itself without limitation, and it exceeds everything' (*Liber* 1.2.2; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 66, ll. 20–2; tr. Fox 1987: 26). The interiority of cosmic space is a trace of divine space, an analogy of enclosure.

Hence the topography of the wheel-egg conveys its own imperative, a metric imperative: to interpret the vision, one must measure the sphere. At the end of Vision 2, Hildegard observes brilliant rays or threads of light emitted from the central human figure, which cross the concentric circles (*signa circularum*) and connect all the symbolic images (*signa figurarum*) that populate the vision, interweaving and inscribing its space (*implexa et circumdata*). The linear network constructed by these rays binds the separate spheres into a complex whole, whose geometrical order permits it to be 'measured by a precise and accurate measure' (*recta et distincta mensura metiebantur*) (*Liber* 1.2.1; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 65, ll. 178–86). The sphere's interiority allows for distinction among the layers of different elements, while its roundness encircles them and enables precise measurement (*circuitio et recta mensura*) (*Liber* 1.2.3; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 66, ll. 3–11). This act of measurement, Hildegard plainly states, is performed through her own *verbi*, as she interprets her vision in subsequent pages of her book (*Liber* 1.2.1; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 65, ll. 185–6). To interpret the vision is to measure its space.

Hildegard repeats this methodological maxim from the beginning of Vision 2 again at its end. But now she adds two observations that point ahead toward Visions 3 and 4. First, the total geometrical order of the world sphere (*circuitus mundi*) is generated out of divine Love. For Hildegard the essential structure of creation becomes visible in the

intersecting rays of light that span across the cosmos like a geometrical grid, ‘the exceedingly elegant ordering, shining above everything, containing everything, binding everything’ (*elegantissima eius ordinatio super omnia lucens omniaque continens et constringens*). Knowledge of that sphere provides a trace of that Love, which gathers every creature together to itself (*Liber* 1.2.46; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 111–12, ll. 3–5, 17–19).

Hildegard also observes that Vision 2 expresses two parallel cosmic structures, two ways in which Love grounds the very possibility of ‘fitting measurement’ (*conuenienterque iuste mesure coaptat*). We find traces of divine order in the balance of elemental forces, the macrocosm; but we also detect them in the organic segmentation of human body (*compagines membrorum hominis*), the internal network of the microcosm (*Liber* 1.2.46; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 112, ll. 11–16). These two occasions for measurement, physics and anatomy, impel the measurer to theological predication. The particular distances they calculate become analogies of our infinite distance from God. The proximity of liver to spleen, or tendon to bone, proceeds from the mysterious proximity of divine Love to all beings. What is Hildegard’s imperative to measure distances, if not another way to describe the awesome theonymic burden of cataphatic mysticism—rued by Augustine too, but then embraced.

In Vision 3, Hildegard’s focus remains on the same human form. As she watches, a series of tremendous winds animates the microcosmos, rotating the firmament around it and stimulating the organs within. Hildegard charts the parallel patterns of winds and humors in a kind of narrative diagnosis—not quite cartography, not quite anatomy, but what we might call an integrated physiography of the world-body (*Liber* 1.3.1; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 114–19). In Vision 4, she peers further into the same microcosmos, initially to study the structure of the earth itself (*Liber* 1.4.1–13). But it soon becomes clear that Vision 4 will usher the first half of the symphonic *Liber* toward its conclusion. It also delivers Hildegard to her true destination all along, the incarnation of the Word into human form, when the vision ends with a profound exegesis of John 1: 1–14 (*Liber* 1.4.105).

In a brilliant rhetorical turn, Hildegard encloses this Christological moment textually, as a latent divine mystery abiding in the centre of *Liber*, just as the incarnation itself secretly dwelled within the Creator from all eternity. Just as the heart dwells within the body, writes Hildegard, the Word dwells within (*latere*) the Father; and just as the heart encloses (*claudere*) its reasons in silence, the Word has preordained the particular schema of human anatomy even before the creation of the world (*Liber* 1.4.14; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 145, ll. 8–14). In short: God’s inmost space is the space of the human body. Hildegard’s surprising proposal is not only a doctrine of the eternal predestination of incarnation, a mystical tradition that spans from Maximus Confessor to Nicholas of Cusa (McGinn 2002). It is also a bold spatialization of incarnation, shifting from diachronic sacred history to the synchronous logic of containment—a Marian or, one is tempted to add, uterine logic: ‘for indeed God willed that the human form should cloak (*tegeret*) the holy Godhead; likewise God circumscribed (*designauit*) all creatures in the human form, just as every creature appears through God’s Word’ (*Liber* 1.4.14; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 145, ll. 16–18). Because the human has always been the secret

interior of God (Trinity), the human can become the exterior of God (incarnation), and all beings remain within it (creation).

First, on the exterior of Vision 4, so to speak, Hildegard maps the physical architecture of the creation onto the sinews of human anatomy. The head is like the firmament, but she also discovers meaning in the brain, eyes, eyebrows, nose, tongue, teeth, chin, and hair (*Liber* 1.4.15–47). Human arms and legs stretch out to mark the centre of the world order, but one must attend equally to blood, breasts, stomachs, and sexual organs (*Liber* 1.4.48–86). In these passages Hildegard records a series of precise, though not mathematical, measurements of the human body (*recta et equalis mensura*), ever searching for their symmetry (*equalitas*). She calculates the relative breadth and width of limbs, compares proportions of brow to nose, and estimates cranial rotundity (e.g. *Liber* 1.4.15–17; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 146–9).

Then, as if reaching the interior of Vision 4, Hildegard inscribes a second narrative map—now of incarnation, not creation, but once again articulated after the shape of the human body. Now she repeats the point of departure of Vision 4: ‘God has delineated (*designavit*) his entire work within the human form’ (*Liber* 1.4.105; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 249, l. 38). On this basis Hildegard begins to read the outlines of the body from top to bottom, finding the Word made flesh legible in every sinew and joint. She travels from skull to the five senses, to the arms, down through the chest and heart, to the thighs, knees and feet (*Liber* 1.4.105; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 250–60). In this way Hildegard’s cataphatic theology of incarnation is written on the palimpsest of cosmic and corporeal spaces. The body of Jesus is the zone where both intersect with the space of God’s dwelling. Like many ancients before her, she connects the creation of the world in Genesis 1 with its recreation in John 1; in the beginning was the Word who creates and the Word who becomes flesh, one Word. But unlike most, Hildegard defines this common *principium* not as divine language or divine knowledge, but divine space. At the very beginning of all things, the will of God first ‘opened itself’ (*se iam aperuit*), she explains. The Word was always there, but the revelation, which gave us something to say, would never have arrived had God not opened Godself (*se non aperuisset*) (*Liber* 1.4.105; Derolez and Dronke 1996: 250, ll. 73–6). Hildegard seems to suggest that the incarnation is nothing other than the disclosing of the enclosed human form, the manifestation of the eternal divine interior: in the beginning was the Open.

OF OTHER SPACES

The examples I have surveyed suggest profound connections between mysticism and spatiality. Gregory of Nyssa considered infinite space to be the native soil of mystical theology. John of Damascus relied on concepts of quantity and line to defend the iconicity of Jesus. For Proclus, visual imagination is a geometrical screen that prepares the mind for theological speech. Ignatius taught that prayer begins when the imagination composes an interior landscape for the soul to inhabit and observe. Hildegard of

Bingen is the master architect of the same spherical structures of enclosure praised by Bachelard and Sloterdijk: the orb, the egg, the womb, and indeed the human form itself as the favoured vessel of divine mysteries. There is much more to cataphatic mystical theology than predicative statements about God or naïve pictorial thinking. On the contrary, the practice of cataphasis is an active participation in the divine activity of space creation, opening new worlds, shaping new geometries, manifesting the hidden. As they unfold from visual projection to spatial construction to topographical mapping, cataphatic traditions establish their own legitimacy alongside apophatic traditions.

Hildegard's particular spatial signature, the figure of protective enclosure—the Bachelardian 'grace of the curve'—is a classic in the genre, but it remains only one theological possibility. Even if we confined ourselves to medieval female visionaries, there are numerous other traditions of cataphatic mysticism that we might have compared, myriad other spaces. Davis has studied the theological potency of the infinitesimal 'point' in Julian of Norwich and the *Cloud* author (Davis 2008: 127–36). Likewise we might have compared Teresa of Avila's passage through an 'interior castle' of crystalline rooms spiralling like a torus around the divine light, or the complex terrains of the body in the writings of Angela of Foligno, where divine and human spaces intimately overlap.

One especially interesting contrast could be drawn between Hildegard's mystical spaces and those of Hadewijch of Brabant, the thirteenth-century beguine (Dreyer 2005; Mommaers 2004). In place of Hildegard's rounded spheres, Hadewijch begins from the inverse geometry of the flat plane. If Hildegard constructs concave interiors that enclose, protect, and open, Hadewijch favours a convex disclosure of the self into a space so exposed it approaches flatness, completely unfolded into a wilderness of immanence. Rather than the nested divine containers of Hildegard's visions, Hadewijch confronts her readers with the fundamental distance between divine Love and human lover, the pure exteriority of exile. She positions these two poles, God and soul, as reciprocal chasms yawning over each other, abyss crying out to abyss (McGinn 1995). The dislocation even permeates the interior of her self-identity, as the character of Hadewijch is rent in two, one earthly self and one heavenly self, without intersection.

Hadewijch's stanza poems reflect similar themes: exile, the abyss, storms, deserts, plains, winter, and hunger (Hart 1980: 183–9). Such images are more precisely defined in Hadewijch's remarkable theological letters. In Letter 18, Hadewijch envisions the soul and God as reciprocal channels cutting through each other into infinite openness—a spatial torsion difficult for Euclidean geometry, but not for the mystical imaginary: 'Soul is a way for the passage of God from his depths (*diepsten*) into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths (*diepheit*), which cannot be touched except by the soul's abyss' (Van Mierlo 1947: 155, ll. 73–8; tr. Hart 1980: 86; cf. Mommaers 2004: 139–44). Like Hildegard's *Scivias*, Hadewijch's shorter visions (e.g. Visions 1–3) stage only didactic, static images, as if lacking the textual space to animate an image in multiple dimensions; they often tend toward allegory or paranesis. But like Hildegard's *Liber divinorum operum*, Hadewijch's longer visions mobilize greater visual motion and spatial depth, staging highly original virtual landscapes. They plumb the 'abyss of fruition' (Vision 11), cleave Hadewijch's identity

into two disjunct planes (Vision 4), depict Christ as dynamic shapeshifter (Vision 7), or assume the perspective of a heavenly vantage point (Vision 6) (Vekeman 1980; Hart 1980: 263–305).

Analysing and cataloguing the multiverse of possible spaces would require several volumes, but even the distant vista of such a compendium of mystical geometry ought to inspire awe. In our century, the boundaries of real and virtual spaces are increasingly porous. Yet it still requires some mental effort for us to grasp the proximity between cataphatic mysticism and spatiality, let alone between Christian theology and geometrical measure. The ancients and medievals examined here operated within a different mental universe. They wrote before the quantification of ideal space by Copernicus, Galileo, and Descartes cast an infinite grid across the cosmic manifold, delivering us into what Heidegger named the ‘age of the world picture’ (Heidegger 2002). For us moderns, an ugly ditch remains between poetic, religious accounts of space and objective scientific accounts. Our pre-modern examples might be stimulating to think with, but they remain part of a literary imaginary, valuable but unreal.

And yet, so long as the notion of ‘mystical space’ is only a poetic fable, cataphatic mysticism remains indebted to a second hermeneutical moment, which erases its images in the name of apophatic sobriety and higher truths. If its spaces are only imaginary, cataphasis surrenders its autonomy and legitimacy. Still, in our era, on this side of the modern valorization of mathematical geometry, it remains difficult to articulate how one might understand mystical spaces as real, even measurable, and likewise how the religious imagination might operate as genuinely geometrical construction.

One especially valuable resource for addressing these challenges is the mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa, the fifteenth-century German cardinal. Cusanus (his humanist moniker) was that rare mind who, alongside his familiarity with medieval Christian mysticism and philosophy, somehow also kept abreast of contemporary mathematics, cartography, optics, and astronomy. He must be one of the only bishops to have penned as many pages of geometrical proofs as mystical sermons. Deeply impressed by the negative theologies of Ps.-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, Cusanus slowly discovered how to transform the ‘learned ignorance’ of their apophysis into what he called the ‘bright nearness’ of visionary cataphasis, without compromising either positive or negative moments. His ventures into mystical theology were so many experiments in constructing new configurations of virtual spaces. Some of these repeat ancient themes: the walled garden, the cloud of unknowing, the sacred city, the microcosmos. But in other instances Nicholas seems to struggle toward a rapprochement between religious and scientific models of space, even before the rift between them had fully solidified in the seventeenth century.

In *De docta ignorantia* (1440), Cusanus repeats the Hermetic image of God as an infinite sphere, but then transfers those attributes to the physical universe on theological grounds, anticipating modern cosmology (Harries 2001). In *De visione dei* (1453), he draws on Renaissance optical theory to construct liturgical spaces around an icon, anticipating modern perspectivalism (Certeau 2015). In *De ludo globi* (1463), he delineates the space of mystical theology as three coterminous, superimposed spheres: the

world of the cosmos, the world of the self, and the ‘world’ that is God (Albertson 2009). In other works he defines the Trinity as a self-measuring Angle; invents a game of spherical balls orbiting a geometrized cosmos with Christ at the centre; depicts God as a cartographer mapping creation; and posits his own phenomenology of ‘roundness’ (*rotunditas*). As one of Nicholas’s contemporaries already observed, the German cardinal pursued less a *theologia naturalis* or *theologia mystica* than a daring *theologia geometrica* (Albertson 2014: 222–76).

Poised between the Middle Ages and modernity, the Cusan project does not yield any easy answers for us today. But at least it poses the question of a contemporary reconciliation between geometrical and mystical spaces, and reminds us what is at stake. Cataphasis retains its independence from apophasis only so far as one can affirm, in Bachelard’s words, that ‘inhabited space transcends geometrical space’. Likewise, careful attention to cataphatic mystics on their own terms reveals a factors that has subtly diminished their legitimacy: an accidental alliance between *via negativa* and *mathesis universalis* that endows iconoclastic aesthetics with self-evidence.

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CHAPTER 19

THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND APOPHASIS

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GIVEN my subject, William James serves as an immediate challenge for the integrity of the locution of 'mystical theology', since in his famous treatment of mysticism in *Varieties of Religious Experience* 'mysticism' properly so-called concerns peak experiences of a highly individual sort expressed in first-person and thus in first-order language. This is not a common practice in the mystical theology tradition, which speaks more usually in the mode of address to the would-be spiritual person and provides a programmatic outline of the stages towards the mystical life and what one might expect mystical experience to look like, both subjectively and objectively, and what changes in behaviour or fundamental disposition might be expected to follow from it. Even if James's articulations of the four 'notes' of mystical experience—(i) ineffability; (ii) noetic quality; (iii) authority; (iv) temporal duration—have assumed over the course of a hundred years something like classic status, this does not rule out that at the same time James's position represents a false start, which ignores the history of its own production out of American Transcendentalism, involving an unjustifiable abstraction from the religious traditions which provide the symbols and narratives that contextualize mystical experiences. The point has been made with great force by the likes of Steven Katz (1978: 22–74) and Bernard McGinn (1991: 265–343) among others. The point is neither simply sociological nor phenomenological; it is also epistemological. Whether hostile (Katz) or non-hostile (McGinn) to the notion of mystical 'experience', whether in its original Jamesian form or in the revised form of Wayne Proudfoot among others (Proudfoot 1985), most modern experts on mysticism think that easy separation of experience from linguistic, symbolic, narrative, and conceptual coding is epistemologically naïve even if mystical experiences can be said to stretch these codes sometimes to the point of breaking and mutation.

If James or his successors are right, 'mystical theology' either is an oxymoron or it borders on it. With regard to Christianity, in more (Turner 1995) and less emphatic

(McGinn 1991) philosophical registers, the consequences of the absolute distinction between mysticism and mystical theology for the study of the Christian mystical tradition have been amply brought out. Suspicion is cast not only on the ahistorical conceptualization of Christian mystical experience, but also on any complacent distinction between 'mysticism' and 'mystical theology', such as is evident in Underhill (Underhill 1961), for whom Christian thought, practice, and life are second order considerations, providing mere context for a first order experience. Mystical theology, by contrast, is better regarded as a language in the first instance, and this language deploys to various extents and in various ways the Christian symbols of Christ, Mary, Trinity, grace, transfiguration, as well as general symbols of light and darkness, speaking and silence, narratives of conversion, progress and regress, ascent and descent. Mystical theology also deploys concepts fashioned to underscore and regulate the relation between the Christian mystical subject and God, as well as to remind of the constitutive oddness of this relation given God's absolute incommensurability with anything else in the universe however extravagantly wonderful.

Of course, as there is nothing like an invariant Christian mystical experience, neither is there an invariant Christian mystical theology. This is not to say, however, that there are not family resemblances between the different forms of Christian mystical thought, for example between Origen and Bernard of Clairvaux, between Augustine and St John of the Cross, and between Gregory of Nyssa and Teresa of Avila. All of these forms of mystical theology are rooted in scripture; all aim to represent the aspirations of the ecclesial believer as such and not simply the writer, and although theological correctness is not to the foreground, nonetheless, almost all feel comfortable deploying theological constructs in a non-doctrinal environment in outlining the movement of the self (or church) to God, which in all cases is predicated on God's prior movement towards the religious believer. The examples used above are chosen for their exemplarity, which is not to deny that there are other potential examples of mystical theology, such as in the New Testament in general and Paul in particular, or among modern and post-modern figures. Although I am aware that my last example dates from the sixteenth century, examples of mystical thought can be found well into the modern period. That favourite of Heidegger, Angelus Silesius (1624–77), who unites the apophatic mystical thought of Meister Eckhart with the daring theosophy of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), comes at the very end of the seventeenth century. One could equally speak to the mystical thought of Fénelon (1651–1715) and Madame Guyon (1648–1717). And going back to the Transcendentalism which provides something of a context for James, in a figure such as Emerson at least it can justifiably be cast as a form of mysticism, even if it demonstrates a break from the Christian figuring of God as absolutely transcendent. Moreover, mention of the voluminous writings of Thomas Merton, which articulate a synthetic version of mystical theology woven together from the best of the Eastern and Western mystical theology traditions, while being prepared to borrow from Buddhism, is sufficient to refute the view that mystical theology belongs to the past. It is only for pragmatic reasons, therefore, that I perform something like a historical reduction, and restrict my remarks to the complex assemblage of discourses between the third and sixteenth century which, despite manifest differences regarding the centrality of experience, and

its critical ratio vis-à-vis the Church, elicit real resemblances with respect to each other across space and time. It is within this confessedly broad historical sweep that I explore the epistemological contours of mystical theology with specific focus on difficulties in naming God and the linguistic protocols availed of mystics to intimate real intimacy with God while acknowledging divine transcendence and mystery. I will take account here of what has been referred to as the 'intellectualist' and 'affective' inflections of the mystical theology tradition and tease out differences between these two main lines of mystical theology. In order to exercise a measure of control, I select an exemplar who functions as a hinge around whom we can constellate other representatives in each inflection. In the case of the former I will select the sixth-century Syrian monk, Pseudo-Dionysius. In the case of the latter I select Bernard of Clairvaux. While ideally both the intellectualist and affective traditions would be given equal treatment, the topic tends to favour the intellectualist tradition, since while the consciousness of the aporetics of naming God is shared by both, it is in the intellectualist line that the epistemological issues are made thematic. Accordingly, I will give a bit more attention to this side of the mystical theology tradition.

RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE INTELLECTUALIST TRADITION: THE FUNCTION OF APOPHASIS

We know that the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius has had throughout history major traction in Eastern and Western Christianity (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987). The fertility of the very small Dionysian corpus is evident in the way it influenced the thought of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas and, despite protest, passed into the main stream of Eastern Christian thought. This is even more true in Western Christianity as witnessed by the adoption and sometime adaptation of the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius in such figures as John Scotus Eriugena, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Eckhart, Jean Gerson, and Nicholas of Cusa. Moreover, the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius continues to lay claim to the attention of philosophers of religion (Turner 1995: 19–49) and contemporary theology (Von Balthasar 1984: 144–210). It does so for a number of reasons: first and foremost, the Dionysian corpus offers an unsurpassable reflection on the required stretching, bending, and even tormenting of our normal use of language, if our language is going to be as appropriate as possible with regard to God who as Logos is the ground of our language and not a possible object within it. Another way of putting this is to say that the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius provides the protocols for naming God, which apply whenever we speak about God and/or whenever God is an object of address. Application of these protocols becomes more rather than less exigent the deeper the intimacy we hope to find with God. Second, acknowledging the problem of our speech regarding God and responsively and responsibly generating protocols

of divine naming are not in the strict sense forms of philosophical inquiry, even if philosophical inquiry can generate similar protocols, given the conviction that there is a transcendent dimension to reality or value that cannot be fully mastered by our speech. As Andrew Louth has so skilfully disclosed (Louth 2007: 35–50) Plotinus's attempt to work through the difficulties of speaking of the One and Plato's deliberations with respect to the Good in the *Republic* as *epekeina tes ousias* are at the very least homologous to what is attempted in Pseudo-Dionysius and even earlier in Gregory of Nyssa. Nonetheless, a condition of the specifically Christian reflection on speech about God is that it honours scripture as God's speech about divine action in the world, and also honours the tradition of reflection on biblical speech and the traditions of thought, practice, and form of life made possible by it.

Third, mystical theology is among other things a forensic language reminding all believers of the self-involving nature of all speech about God that ineluctably moves towards a condition of prayer. I suppose the summary of this is the claim that in texts such as the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* Pseudo-Dionysius provides a grammar of Christian mystical theology. I am using the term 'grammar' in the broadly Wittgensteinian way used by Denys Turner (Turner 2004: 149–68). Now this grammar has broader and narrower extents. The narrow extent—narrow grammar—is provided in the protocols of divine naming whose purpose is to facilitate experience with God who is hoped for, prayed to, and the ultimate referent of biblical and ecclesial discourse. Failure to get the protocols right means that one's discourse will pick out an object in the universe instead of God who totally transcends it. At the same time, since positive and negative predication with regard to God is never simply a logical analysis of the appropriateness of applicability, but part of a language of praise (Marion 2001: 139–95), to mistake the referent of our discourse and misidentify the object of our address is necessarily to be guilty of idolatry. The larger grammar of the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius consists in contextualizing this language about God in the individual's and the Church's journey towards God by taking account of the Bible as divine speech (Jones 1996: 355–71), the liturgical use of language (Golitzen 2014) and the practices and forms of life which support the pedagogy of divine naming and which are supposed to flow from it. Now, even if for the most part I will focus on the narrow grammar of naming and address, nevertheless I still want to underscore (a) how the narrow grammar derives much of its meaning and force from the way in which it forms the mystical subject; (b) how the broader grammar of Christian symbols, narratives, concepts, and practices frame the formation of the mystical subject and thus guarantee that the mystical subject is the Christian subject, albeit one peculiarly alert to the prospects of participation in God.

In this reflection on the protocols of language about God, Pseudo-Dionysius conveniently divides such protocols into positive naming (*kataphasis*) and negative naming (*apophasis*). A number of things are evident from the most distracted of looks at Pseudo-Dionysius's main texts. First, the enterprise is undertaken on behalf of the Christian community; it is neither the work of a religiously unaffiliated thinker, nor directed towards such persons. This is indicated by the fact that Pseudo-Dionysius's articulation

of the kataphatic side of mystical theology in the *Divine Names* borrows names from scripture (DN 1–4, 8, 11, 12), even as the same text shows Pseudo-Dionysius content to borrow metaphysical categories from Neoplatonic philosophy (DN 5–7, 9–10). ‘Love’ (DN 4), ‘peace’ (DN 11), ‘righteousness’, and ‘salvation’ (DN 8) are obviously biblical, whereas the triad of Being–Intellect–Life is obviously Neoplatonic (DN 5–7). Of course, there is overlap, the symbol of ‘light’ (DN 4) and the constructs of ‘eternity’ (DN 10), and maybe ‘perfect’ (DN 13), arguably, belong to both regimes of discourse. It follows logically that *apophasis* or unnamings is also biblically and thus Christianly specified. Here, fortunately, one does not simply have to rely on logical inference. Relative to his other great text, *Mystical Theology*, negative predication or *apophasis* is recessive in the *Divine Names*, but the prefix ‘hyper’ does get used, especially with regard to the triad Being–Intellect–Life. Similarly, it is also the case in the *Mystical Theology* that at its most apophatic extreme Pseudo-Dionysius is naming the triune God as the ultimate signified even as he protests linguistic and conceptual incompetence with respect to the ‘hyperessential Godhead’ (*hyperousias thearchia*) who in principle transcends all signification. Nor can it be denied that this text offers a biblical locus for the operation of the subversion of signification, namely Exodus 33 and Moses’ experience of the God who in giving the name of the Tetragrammaton withdraws his nameability (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987: 137).

In this extraordinarily brief and enigmatic text, after his reprise of the Exodus theophany Pseudo-Dionysius proceeds to lay out further the aporetics of divine naming, first in his beautiful image of sculpting a statue, that is, of the carving away of word and concept as obscuring the possibility of intimacy with the transcendent Godhead, and then, second, in chapters 2–5, in his articulation of the operation of negation regarding the divine captured in percept, concept, and language. If the Godhead is given to the self that has been initiated and undergone purification, nonetheless, this givenness is not translatable into any of the standard modes of givenness. Thus the Godhead does not come to light or come into the light. The ineffectuality of the common modes of experience and grasping or, better, their having been put out of action, is indicated in *Mystical Theology* by both ‘darkness’ and ‘silence’. Darkness is the limit of percept and concept; silence the limit of speech. Importantly, however, neither ‘darkness’ nor ‘silence’ are privative terms as such. Pseudo-Dionysius can exploit a history of non-privative uses of these terms in the Cappadocian tradition to which he is enormously indebted. Even more importantly, and with great self-consciousness, he can deploy the language of paradox: the darkness is dazzling in the way the glorious God of the Bible is dazzling and Christ is dazzling, and the way the beyond-Being or the really real of the Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophical traditions are. Similarly, the silence of which Pseudo-Dionysius speaks is more eloquent than the most eloquent forms of speech, which only reach what is determinate and nameable. Needless to say Pseudo-Dionysius’s use of oxymoron is intended to remind not only monks, but also any subsequent reader of his text, that all God-talk and all invocation of God is odd. At the same time, however, we should draw attention to the complementary function of underscoring a givenness that is not indeterminate but rather superdeterminate. This is to say that the givenness of the

One, whom we would name and with respect to whom we would allow a provisional referentiality in order to address, is real.

Under pressure from post-modern polemics against the 'transcendental signified' (Derrida 1977; Turner 2000: 11–34), I will return to this point shortly. For now, let me underscore two points. The first I have touched on already, that is, that all treatment of divine names, whether positive or negative and however second-order the language appears to be, implicitly belongs to the order of prayer and praise. This is to say that the discussion of divine names is not analytic in the strict sense, but is capable of being pressed into the service of venerating the truly real God rather than an idol. It is tempting to suggest that this reluctance to allow second-order discourse to be merely second-order marks the difference between theology and philosophy. This would more likely be true, however, if we were talking about the second-order language in modern philosophy, where built into analytics is a disinterest in addressing presupposition, background beliefs, and fundamental dispositions. But this is not true of the Neoplatonic philosophy with which Pseudo-Dionysius is familiar. It is not true, for example, of the philosophies of Plotinus or Proclus for whom even the most abstract of philosophical analyses seems to facilitate rather than get in the way of theurgy. The second has to do with the aspect of hierarchy: purifying one's speech with regard to God is part of a process of initiation in which there is the instructor and the one instructed, the one who has already mastered the way of language, and possibly also mastered the ascetic practices of purification that allow getting the divine names to matter, indeed, to matter utterly.

Although one could hardly deny genius to Pseudo-Dionysius's two main texts, and one should rightly stress their innovative systematicity when compared to the theological literature that preceded him, nonetheless, the Syrian monk depends significantly on the Cappadocian theological tradition that preceded him and especially the work of Gregory of Nyssa. Together with Basil and Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa emphasized the ultimately mysterious nature of the divine Trinity which—or better Who—is the origin and end of all reality. In the context of his struggle with a semi-Arian such as Eunomius, Nyssa emphasized the necessity of negative predication with regard to God who can be captured neither in language nor concept (Gregory of Nyssa 1979: 146–8). Pseudo-Dionysius can be understood to have both learned this lesson and to have extended it by reconnecting mystery with the older sacramental sense of mystery (Bouyer 1980: 42–55). Pseudo-Dionysius might also be thought to be dependent upon on Nyssa with regard to the crucial matter of whether in outlining the aporetics of language regarding God all referential function is suspended or even taken out of the equation. If so, this would mean that Christian mysticism would effectively end on an agnostic note. Positive and negative predication of God would then effectively function as a ladder to be kicked away in a manner redolent of the very last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Of course, this would also make the exemplary kind of mystical theology articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius homologous with the kind of scepticism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In an insight of real genius, in *Against Eunomius* Nyssa makes a principled distinction between apophaticism and agnosticism. Agnosticism is the stance taken towards God as a radical alterity which insists that nothing is really

known of this alterity including its existence. In contrast, for Nyssa, divine naming in general and apophasis in particular are the means to account for a presence or super-presence which exceeds our conceptual categories and our language. The existence of this reality unlike any other is not in question: what is in question is whether we allow God to be God in a self-communication that is transformative of our entire being or fail to do so by speaking and thinking of God as if God were graspable without qualification in and through the categories and language we use with respect to objects in the world. Pseudo-Dionysius does not invent the distinction between apophaticism and agnosticism; rather he assumes it. For him divine naming is not purely instrumental; even negative predication has a referential function: it points to a superessential Godhead—perhaps further specified as triune—which is qualitatively distinct from all else.

Giving the powerful repetition of Nyssa in Pseudo-Dionysius it seems a legitimate inference that the preservation of referential function is characteristic of the mystical theology of the Eastern Church. Now, while one is not entitled to infer the same with regard to mystical theology in the Western tradition, the evidence suggests that Pseudo-Dionysius is nothing less than exemplary here as well. Although Augustine's thought is not as rigorously apophatic as that of Pseudo-Dionysius, examples abound in both his classic texts and sermonic material. For example, in *De doctrina christiana*, which presents a general theory of signs and thus lays out a pattern of knowledge and cultural competence, Augustine famously points to the difficulties in signifying God (1.6) who, accordingly, has to be regarded as beyond sign and concept (Augustine 1996: 146–7). But the strong emphasis on apophasis notwithstanding, Augustine is convinced that God is signified, albeit inadequately. Thus the emergence of the 'transcendental signified' which Derrida decries and which he opposes by semiosis that never comes to rest in a signified that guarantees the signifying system. Another example in Augustine of the coexistence of apophasis and referential function is to be found in *De Trinitate*, book 8. Just after his famous theological articulation of the notion of Trinity as consisting of one essence and three persons and elaborating their relations (*De Trinitate* 5–7), Augustine self-consciously turns to insist on the mystery and incomprehensibility of God. Augustine's intent is to chasten our sense that the conceptual articulation of the Trinity gives us cognitive purchase over God. He insists that no such purchase is possible, and that even his own articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is only relatively adequate, where one mark of such is that it never forgets that the God who gives himself to us in the economy is mysterious. But Augustine is no more claiming here than in *De doctrina Christiana* that naming the divine, especially through apophasis, is useless, and can be discarded. Both the individual and the Church require this linguistic discipline in order to pick out God from everything, precisely in order to mark God as the One, the only One, who escapes clear apprehension and comprehension.

Again, there are differences between Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius on this point: for example, Augustine does not allow the same level of tension between apophasis and referential function as Pseudo-Dionysius. Nor, correspondingly, does Pseudo-Dionysius make quite as transparent the referential function that remains even in negations. These different emphases are important in the mystical theology tradition,

and dictate, for instance, that in the end despite his commentary on *The Divine Names* and despite the fact that he quotes Pseudo-Dionysius over one thousand times throughout the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas more nearly belongs to the Augustinian tradition. Similarly, it also dictates that, despite the fact that Meister Eckhart cites Augustine approximately ten times more than Pseudo-Dionysius, he is best understood to belong to the more risqué Dionysian tradition. Two essential features of mystical theology transcend differences between Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine: first, the use of apophatic language as an essential ingredient in the grammar of mystical theology, one of whose central aims is to subvert claims of cognitive competence with regard to God; and second, that the mystic is in contact with God as an excessive reality. For the mystical theologian, contact with God as the 'really real'—to avail of a Neoplatonic locution—is presumed. The main function of mystical theology is that of clarifying and intensifying an always already given presence, which is indicated in and by salvation history, and enacted in eucharist and the reading of scripture and the individual and communal prayers of the believing community.

As already indicated, the anonymous Syrian monk who wrote the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* did not provide a reader an account of his first-order experience. But the author is not uninterested in such experience. Perhaps the best way of thinking how the mystical theology of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* relates to mystical experience is to uncover its threefold function. Specifically, mystical theology is stipulative, programmatic, and reflective regarding mystical experience. Mystical theology functions as *stipulative* in that it insists that the maximal level of intimacy with God desired by the Christian is impossible unless the Christian can pick out this God. This is made possible by following the protocols of appropriate speech for God who cannot be treated as an actual or possible object in the universe. Mystical theology functions as *programmatic* in that in addition to suggesting the ultimate priority of apophasis over kataphasis, mystical theology also suggests an order from saying to unsaying and knowing to unknowing. The economy of mystical theology language is restricted in that unsaying is connected to a very determinate saying concerning God and our relation to him, and unknowing is defined by the way it goes beyond a particular form of conceptual knowing that turns out to be inappropriate if taken to exhaustively know God. And, finally, mystical theology is *reflective* or recollective in that it formalizes the linguistic practices of the masters who might reasonably be thought to model the mystical experiences of God at which a particular Christian community (monastic or otherwise) aims, and so aims on behalf of Christianity as a whole.

Extrapolating from my discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius, I submit that mystical theology is a regime of discourse whose purpose is to discipline the Christian self in a linguistic and conceptual register—there are likely other more practical registers of asceticism, liturgical activity, and actions of charity—and thereby promote mystical experience that will be precisely an experience of the right thing (to evoke Eliot's *Four Quartets*). The ultimate aim of mystical theology is not Jamesian 'peak experience', but rather transformation in which the intent is that an average speaker and thus an average experiencer of the divine learns to speak a language that enables a more intense relation with God.

What is operative in mystical theology is, then, not only hierarchy but teleology, and more specifically the formation of a mystical subjectivity, which is paradoxical in that it demands the disowning of oneself as subject. I will speak in due course of this feature as it is operative in Eckhart. Once again it is important not to draw too great a contrast between Eastern and Western forms of mystical theology. It is true that a spiritual writer such as Augustine is very comfortable using the first person pronoun, thereby suggesting that this 'I' is an irrefragable substance which acts and suffers. One might be tempted to conclude that Augustine—and thereby Western Christianity—takes a different view from that of Pseudo-Dionysius who could be thought to represent Eastern thought. There are good reasons once again both to allow differences in emphases, but deny differences in fundamental commitments. Making the case from the Augustinian side, two considerations are brought to mind. First, in his *Commentary on the Psalms* which, it could be argued, is Augustine's most sustained mystical text, the mystical self becomes articulated in and through the communal praying of the Psalms in which Christ can be regarded as the proper subject of locution rather than the individual Christian believer. Second, the two texts of Augustine which we have adduced as being relevant to the deep issue of apophatic discourse, that is, *De doctrina Christiana* and *De Trinitate*, are texts of formation, in the former case formation in and through the reading of scripture and knowing the difference between scripture and all other cultural classics, and in the latter case formation in the correct conspectus on God such that the Christian, whose goal is the most intense relation with God possible, does not miss the mark and erect an idol.

The mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius was variously appropriated throughout the medieval period. Hugh of St Victor and Albert the Great are just two of the more important figures who preceded Aquinas and Eckhart. The appropriation of Pseudo-Dionysius is often comprehensive and pertains to the entire spiritual life and even to our hope in the beatific vision. Still, whether and how we name God is an identifying feature of Dionysianism, and was seen in the scholastic period to have constituted an indelible contribution to the way the human subject relates to God through knowing God. When it comes to naming God it is certainly the case that Pseudo-Dionysius is a major figure for Aquinas. He is the main figure in Aquinas's treatment of the issue in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, and the Dionysian adage that we know *that* God is, not *what* God is, stands out in the Prologue of the *Summa Theologiae*. Although Augustine and Aristotle are considerably more important influences on Aquinas overall in the *Summa*, Pseudo-Dionysius is in fact a major interlocutor in Aquinas's express treatment of divine names in *ST* I.13. Crucially, Aquinas wrote a commentary on the *Divine Names* shortly before commencing the *Summa Theologiae*. Leaving aside Aquinas's complex technical apparatus of signification, broadly speaking we can say that the main inclination in Aquinas's interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius appears to be one of containing apophasis and relieving the pressure between apophasis and referential function which is most apparent in *Mystical Theology*. This is brought into relief by contrasting Aquinas's interpretation of the *Divine Names* with that of Albert the Great (Blankenhorn 2015), who not only avails of the *Mystical Theology* as the point of view from which to interpret the

Divine Names, but, without being anxious about agnosticism, seems comfortable with saying that God exceeds signification and not simply particular manners of signification, which is Aquinas's position.

In his interpretation of the *Divine Names*, Aquinas follows Pseudo-Dionysius in insisting that without revelation we have no way of knowing the divine nature. Granting such a revelation, we can make some headway in knowing God—which knowing, of course, is not a commodity, but a privileged way of relating to the reality that is most real and the foundation of all else. Aquinas distinguishes in Pseudo-Dionysius' text between intelligible and symbolic names, and privileges the former over the latter. Examples of such intelligible names are 'One', 'Cause', 'Wisdom', and 'Trinity'. Although Aquinas reads Pseudo-Dionysius fairly accurately, nonetheless, one can notice a subtle shift. He makes explicit a priority for intelligible over symbolic names which is merely implicit in the *Divine Names*, and indeed not fully supported by Pseudo-Dionysius in *Mystical Theology*. A further interpretive decision is equally salient. Aquinas dutifully follows Pseudo-Dionysius in underscoring the three ways of naming God, negation, causality, and eminence. But again the emphasis appears to have shifted. The emphasis in Aquinas's learned and insightful commentary falls on causality and eminence rather than negation, which the Dominican seems to think has restricted rather than universal application. With appropriate bows to the finitude of human knowing, Aquinas wants to say that the divine names just cited, as well as the names 'Being' and 'Good', give us access to the divine nature and not simply God in his dealing with the world. So it is not quite true that we only know *that* God is; we know *what* God is, albeit in an imperfect way.

At the other, more radical, end of the spectrum of the appropriation of the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius lies Meister Eckhart. Eckhart deploys just about the entire apophatic catalogue of Pseudo-Dionysius throughout both his German and Latin works (Meister Eckhart 1986). 'Beyond' (*über*) is a favourite mode of hyperbolization as it is in Pseudo-Dionysius: in the German sermons God is beyond image, understanding, predication, and naming; in his Latin works God gets designated more adequately through negative predication where the Latin *in* functions as the equivalent of the alpha privative. God is routinely referred to as 'ineffable' (*ineffabilis*), incomprehensible (*incomprehensibilis*), and most comprehensively, 'unnameable' (*innominabilis*). What makes Eckhart's work wholly Dionysian is not that it repeats the apophatic language of Pseudo-Dionysius—this has become fairly standard throughout the Christian traditions—but rather that his work is so replete with it. Belonging to the order of Dionysian repetition also is Eckhart's switch in vocabulary from God to Godhead, characterized as 'superessential' or beyond Being. His 'superessential Godhead' (*überwessentliche Gottheit*) is the lexical equivalent of Pseudo-Dionysius's *hyperousias thearchia* (1986: Sermons 9, 24). Actual stretching of the Dionysian tradition does occur, however, when Eckhart comes to attribute 'nothing' (*Nichts*) to the Godhead; this is a move not made in the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius, and, arguably, cannot be made given his Neoplatonic understanding of 'nothing' as a privation.

The ascription of 'nothing' to God or the Godhead is not simply an example of linguistic virtuosity. No less than Pseudo-Dionysius Eckhart is a lover of contradiction, paradox, and hyperbole and, as we have seen, he deploys the full Dionysian battery. As with Pseudo-Dionysius, the issue is precisely the effect of this language on the hearer and reader, specifically prising the hearer or reader away from making God a theme of language or an object in the world. The vocabulary of apophasis itself continually requires refreshing. I suppose we might say with the philosopher of language J. L. Austin that Eckhart is concerned with the perlocutionary force of the language of mystical theology, that is, how language motivates and transforms the hearer or reader. Part of the refreshing occurs by translating Dionysian apophasis into a vernacular idiom; part again by its plain use in sermons; and finally—and this is my main point here—by expanding the vocabulary itself. The Dionysian corpus (and, of course, the sedimented tradition of its appropriation) provides not only a rich lexicon of apophasis, but a risky grammar of apophasis whose vocabulary in principle can be extended. The extension occurs on a need basis, that is, when the perception arises that similar to decay of metaphor into catachresis, the standard regime of apophasis is not as effective as it once was and definitely not as effective as it ideally might be. In his texts Eckhart provides us good reason to believe that he is not convinced that in this respect Aquinas's way of eminence (*via eminentia*), which is based on analogy, is sufficient. As we have seen, Aquinas suggests that as long as we obey certain rules we can apply terms used in the sublunar sphere to God. 'Good' and 'true' are in Aquinas two such relatively unproblematic predications. In German sermon 9 Eckhart directly disputes this (1986: 258). 'Good', he argues, is no more predicable of God than 'darkness' of the sun. Eckhart is being as dialectical as he can possibly be here. He is casting off the way of eminence, which suggests that 'good' is applicable to God as well as human beings provided we add the proviso that God's goodness infinitely surpasses that found in human beings. In order to dismantle what he takes to be a ladder in which we mount to apprehension and comprehension of God, Eckhart shows himself prepared to set aside the fundamental rule that predicates indicative of moral excellence are more appropriate than the opposite when it comes to naming God.

I think that these substantive disagreements, based in part at least on different receptions of Pseudo-Dionysius, can be folded into two larger, more formal issues, first, the perceived relation between apophasis and referential function and, second, the distinction between what I would call an analytics and a rhetoric of mystical theology. Taking these issues in order, it is worth recalling that even at his most apophatic Pseudo-Dionysius never truly renounced the referential function of language. In fact, the function of apophasis is to enable us to distinguish the signified 'God' from all other signifieds. Apophasis, then, is a rule-use of discourse calculated to prevent God being caught in our system of signifiers. Pseudo-Dionysius is clear that God is not just another signifier, nor is He the entire net of signifiers. At the same time, however, apophasis puts all standard operations of signification under extreme pressure as almost to suggest that referential function as such is eclipsed. This is what I meant when I spoke about the

tension between apophasis and referential function. Eckhart perceives that Aquinas and perhaps even Augustine lessen the tension in favour of a less ambiguous and more direct form of reference than is in fact permissible within mystical theology and allowed by Pseudo-Dionysius. In fact, given Eckhart's perception of contemporary needs and the possible relaxation of tension reinforced by the mystical theology discourses, which underscore God as the signified without sufficiently marking the problem of availability, Eckhart is encouraged to amplify the apophatic. In an important respect, for Eckhart balance is achieved in the order of signification only in and through excess. This might in part explain why philosopher-theologians who are inspired by Heidegger tend to prefer Eckhart not only to Aquinas (e.g. Derrida, Reiner Schürmann, John Caputo), but also to Pseudo-Dionysius. But it might also explain how in the end such theologians will ultimately tend to shift their philosophical allegiances to Derrida, who renounces tension between apophasis and referential function in favour of a view of all language as irremediably apophatic since it infinitely defers presence, and thus apprehension and comprehension. On the reading, however, that I have offered, while Eckhart further exacerbates the traditional tension between apophasis and referential function, on pains of exit not only from the Dionysian tradition, but also the Christian tradition, he does not remove the tension by removing of one of the tension's terms.

The second issue concerns my thoroughly pragmatic distinction between an analytics and rhetoric of mystical theology. As a heuristic device we can say that the Dionysian corpus is at once analytic and rhetorical. The account of positive and divine names has a second-order function, namely an elucidation—or what I am calling analysis—of the names that can be ascribed to God and how and, at the very same time, because of the three functions (stipulative, programmatic, reflective) I referred to earlier, they also serve a motivational and transformative purpose. Of course, as a technical term 'anagogy' covers this. I wish, however, to step outside the terms which mystical theology commonly uses to describe itself. Another way we might think of the dispute between Eckhart and Aquinas is that the former is worried that analytics have become so dominant in Dominican thought that the rhetorical, and thus transformative, potential of mystical theology has become more or less recessive. From an Eckhartian perspective this would represent a second declension from Pseudo-Dionysius. Without prejudice to the analytic dimension, the restoration of requisite balance requires considerably greater emphasis on the motivational and transformative elements of the discourse of mystical theology. In other words, it requires that the analytics itself has greater existential force. It is obvious that mystical theology can achieve greater existential force through being heard rather than being read. Thus, Eckhart has the advantage of genre over Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas in his sermon material. This is not to say, however, that genre itself is constitutive of existential force: whether treatise, interpretation of scripture, or sermon, Eckhart is anxious that the analytics of divine naming have motivational effect, which is achieved through paradox, hyperbole, and bringing apophasis to the limit. Emergent conventions in divine naming, as well as those of long duration, have to be disturbed as much as possible for the experience of God as God to be possible, which is precisely an experience in which one does not grasp, possess, or own God.

RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE AFFECTIVE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY TRADITION: THE FUNCTION OF APOPHASIS

It would be going too far to suggest that religious epistemology of the tradition of mystical theology in general and of apophasis in particular consists simply in different inflections of Pseudo-Dionysius. This would not simply be an imperialistic claim but an anachronistic one, since the sixth-century mystical theologian would thereby constitute the fundamental point of view from which to interpret mystical theology's past, a past that opens as early as the third century with Origen (Louth 2007: 51–72), and it would sideline Augustine and the massive influence he exerted on mystical theology down the centuries. Even more importantly, it would fail to recognize that a significant strand in medieval mystical theology operates in the register of love rather than knowledge, where one cannot assume that these issues of signification and apophasis operate in exactly the same way as in the intellectualist tradition. The work of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) presents a prime example of a form of mystical theology that has love at its centre, and, accordingly, his mystical theology essentially plays the kind of hinge role in this part of the chapter that Pseudo-Dionysius played in the first. In paying attention to Bernard's successors, I will privilege Bonaventure, while as regards predecessors, I will note the influence Augustine exerts on Bernard's articulation of a mystical theology regulated by love understood as both eros and agape. At the same time, Bernard's dependence on Augustine and Bonaventure's dependence on him suggest that, while the two inflections of mystical theology entail important differences in religious epistemology in general and apophasis in particular, it would be a mistake to exaggerate them.

Bernard of Clairvaux proves that he is the quintessential love mystic in laying down the experiential basis of Christian life, in proposing as an axiom that the human desire for God (*eros*) is grounded in God's self-communicating love (*agape*), and in his insistence that the hidden meaning of scripture is nothing more or less than the love story between God and human being. Admiring of Anselm's theology, but withholding full assent because of his reservations concerning the scope of natural reason, Bernard routinely opposes love to reason. Only love as radical desire for union with God provides a path that leads the Christian to blessedness and delight. This is a thought repeated throughout Bernard's considerable oeuvre, where numerous pages are devoted to the Christian virtue of humility and the necessity of repentance. Its most succinct expression, however, can be found in *On Loving God* (LG) and the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (SS) (Evans 1987). The emphasis falls equally on love as the way and the consummation of union at which pinnacle the self experiences ecstasy (*excessus*). Moreover, the experience of the binding of lover and beloved is nothing short of a foretaste of the eschatological state, a position so persuasive for Dante that he made Bernard's figuration

of love central to the *Paradiso*. Arguably, Bernard strikes the chord of love harder than any mystic before him. Still, neither in intention nor in fact is Bernard an absolute innovator. He can rely on the affective strand in the historical Augustine as well as the Augustine carried forward by his numerous readers for whom he was the teacher of teachers.

Bernard goes to considerable trouble (in *LG* and *SS*) to get the reader to understand that mystical union is not an individual talent, indeed, that the very ground for the human desire for God can only be found in God. If, arguably, 1 John 4: 8 ('God is love') is the crucial scriptural passage, 1 John 4: 9–10, which specifies the causal relation between divine and human love, is not far behind. In an important passage in *On Loving God* Bernard insists that the triune God is the efficient as well as final cause of human desire (*LG* 6.22). Without prejudice to Christ as the plenary manifestation of divine love, ultimately it is the Trinity that is its grounding matrix, inaccessible except by the aid of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, perhaps made anxious by Anselm's rational method, Bernard feels called on to declare that the pathway to mystical union with neither Christ nor the Trinity happens necessarily; it is made possible and actual only by grace (*SS* 3.2.4). As with Origen before him Bernard privileges the Song of Songs as the biblical text in which the progress of the Christian life and its goal is most perspicuously and eloquently laid out. As a condition of the possibility of its self-evidence, Bernard argues that there is a depth to scripture that needs to be accessed beyond the obvious historical sense of the text as a collection of wedding songs (Sermon 1). Bernard, thereby, shows himself to be in the broad Catholic tradition and with respect to Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs within the tradition of Origen in particular. More specifically, reading the Song of Songs is properly anagogic; reading deep into the text is reading one's person onto and out of the text as a process of transformation that has its term in union between Christ and the soul and ultimately between the triune God and the soul. The image of union in Sermon 2 and throughout the entire series of Sermons on the Song of Songs is the 'kiss', although, as already intimated, Bernard is anxious to underscore that the ground of the kiss is not our moral or religious perfection, but rather God.

While there can be no doubt that Bernard of Clairvaux articulates a distinctive form of mystical theology that is resolutely experiential, inflected by love rather than knowledge, and characterized by the foregrounding the mystical union as a union of love, nonetheless, it would be a mistake to distinguish his form of mystical theology entirely from the forms of mystical theology considered in the previous section of this chapter whose experiential quotient is somewhat lower, whose register is more nearly intellectual, and whose focus is at least as much on articulating the grammar of divine naming as talking to the presence of the divine. The would-be absoluteness of the distinction is alleviated from both the intellectualist and affective sides of mystical theology. First, even if the experiential thrust is not as high in the figures placed within the intellectualist stream, it would be unfair to deny to Augustine a serious experiential component, as it would be niggardly to suggest that he is exclusively interested in the grammar of divine naming and not at all in evoking and celebrating the individual's journey towards God and the realization of an intimate mode of participation in Christ

and in the Trinity that anticipates our state in the next life. Equally, Eckhart, especially in his German sermons, attempts to awaken in us an experience of union with God in an intellectualist and radically ontological key even as he articulates and upsets the received grammar of divine naming. Second, the alleviation is also afoot in Bernard. While it is true that it is typical of Bernard to inveigh against reason, two features of Bernard's discourse compel us to see the polemic as restricted. For one thing the experience of mystical union or the kiss is itself a form of knowledge, albeit one belonging to the order of apprehension rather than comprehension. Using the epistemological categories made famous by Bertrand Russell, one can say that in insisting on the register of love Bernard is effectively reminding the Christian believer of the superiority of knowledge by acquaintance over knowledge by description. Another feature of Bernard's discourse worth noting is that the contrast between love and knowledge is not sustained at the level of the triune God. That the triune God is uniquely characterized as *agape* prevents Bernard in neither *On Loving God* (4.12) nor the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Sermons 2, 4) from identifying God with Wisdom. Here Bernard is displaying his deep Augustinian roots, for throughout his work and especially in *De Trinitate*, Augustine defines the Trinity by wisdom as well as love. Similarly, it would be inaccurate to claim that Bernard's mystical theology systematically excludes apophasis. Given Bernard's commitment to mystical union as the rapturous union of lovers and his holding it up as a lure for making progress in Christian life, it is not surprising that reflective setting forth of the grammar of divine naming and in consequence the elevation of apophasis is not front and centre. Nonetheless, in the two texts under discussion (and also elsewhere) apophatic qualifiers are frequently called on when the experience of union is the object of discussion. Bernard seems to say that in the experience of divine presence more than a mere 'that' is intimated. However correct it is to think of God as Love, Love in its divine form of *agape* eludes all our categories (LG 4.3; SS 4.3.5; SS 8.1.2).

There is something fundamentally right about linking Bonaventure to Bernard, given their common emphasis on experience and their construction of mystical love as a journey in and through loving desire that has its end in mystical union, a union which is with a God who is the love spoken of in John's Gospel and 1 John 4: 8, whose *agapaic* love receives its plenary manifestation in Christ. Needless to say, the close relation between both mystical theologians is not dependent on Bonaventure being directly influenced by Bernard. As Bonaventure proposes in *Legenda Maior*, it is St Francis who provides the exemplum of the mystical life, in its grounding in conversion, in Francis's dramatic journey in and towards love, in his rapturous experience of union with Christ and the communication of the form of Christ in the stigmata, and in the life of action that flows from mystical union while also providing the context of its operation. In comparison to Bernard, however, in Bonaventure the polemic against reason is more muted. In his case one can say that knowledge is not so much excluded from the mystical life as relativized. Bonaventure is more moderate concerning knowledge than Bernard. Yet in his classic *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*, in the context of unfolding the Trinity as the ground of desire and the ultimate condition of union, Bonaventure appears to take a step beyond Bernard, since the Trinity is characterized as love without the qualification of being or

wisdom (Boehner 1993). As is well known, it was this particular feature of Bonaventure's mystical theology that the early Jean-Luc Marion found so attractive and enabled him to draw an almost absolute distinction between the thought of Bonaventure and the more intellectualist and metaphysical Aquinas. Of course, that love is the ultimate characterization of God does not mean that the individual soul has no knowledge of God in the rapture of the union of the soul and Christ and the soul and the Trinity. We can speak of knowledge, but if we do so, then it is in the form of apprehension rather than comprehension, or what earlier, after Bertrand Russell, I referred to as knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge by description. In addition, a fundamental feature of this knowledge is a delight and satisfaction 'none greater than which can be thought'.

Just as Bonaventure owed much to Augustine in his account in the *Itinerarium* of the soul's journey towards God, he owes much to Pseudo-Dionysius regarding both the characterization of Trinitarian love as self-diffusing goodness and the emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God. No more than Aquinas, however, is Bonaventure inclined to separate Augustine from Pseudo-Dionysius or vice versa. The Augustine who provides the model for human love and its realization in intimate communion with God also speaks to divine incomprehensibility, and Pseudo-Dionysius, who is the presiding genius of apophysis in the mystical theology tradition, also supplies a way towards the experience of the presence of the Trinitarian divine that cannot be known in the strict sense. Moreover, when compared with Bernard, we can see that Bonaventure not only speaks to divine mystery in his rendition of first-order encounter with God, he also allows in some measure the unfolding of the Christian grammar of divine naming, and observes the rules of negative predication evident in the intellectualist tradition of mystical theology. This is an important point: it demonstrates the negative capability in the love mystical tradition to be as broad in epistemological compass as the intellectualist tradition, and to manifest at least on occasions the same kind of reflective rigour when it comes to apophysis.

Nonetheless, although the capacity for the grammar of divine naming is, undoubtedly, to be found in this affective inflection of the mystical theology tradition, it is not necessarily its charism. This can be seen by reference to the last mystic that will be discussed here, that is, the sixteenth-century Carmelite, St John of the Cross. Given the epistemological focus of this chapter such truly individuating features of John of the Cross's mystical theology as the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the soul are not as germane as they otherwise would be. These are dramatic features of the mystic way rather than characterizations of our intimate encounter with God and the form of language that is most adequate to render the mystical encounter with the triune God. Such characterizations are provided by his interpretation of the Song of Songs in *The Spiritual Canticle* and also in *The Living Flame of Love*, in which he essentially rewrites in the Spanish vernacular the Song of Songs and provides an annotation of it as if it were the original. Both the more conventional and less conventional of these texts of eros have their finality in the mystical union of lovers. Love is both different from and beyond reason—thus, the reiteration in both texts that union happens in the night (*noche*). In the union of love there is an unsurpassable experience of realization and bliss. At the same time, while comprehension is suspended, apprehension is at its very sharpest. And

while the consummately orthodox John of the Cross makes it clear that the God who is apprehended in love is the Trinity, this God is experienced in the dark and is always hedged with mystery and incomprehensibility. It is noticeable in these texts of the consummation of lover and beloved, however, that there is almost no recourse to the grammar of divine naming and the rules of apophasis. While they may be implied, they are not directly stated. In this respect the religious epistemology of St John of the Cross remains resolutely first level, and within the economy of love mysticism it resembles Bernard more than Bonaventure, who seems to shuttle easily between first- and second-level speech and to show himself to be perfectly capable of speaking the grammar of divine naming and negative predication.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have set aside formalist accounts of mystical experience in favour of a historical approach that facilitates reading off the religious epistemology from what broadly speaking are the intellectualist and affective strands of the Christian mystical theology, which, however, are only very rarely pure types. In some mystical theologians this religious epistemology is merely implicit, in others fully explicit. In some mystical theologians, we see it function both implicitly or operationally and explicitly as a set of epistemological rules in general and apophatic riders in particular. I have favoured the intellectualist tradition in that I judged this tradition to be especially concerned with the problem of idolatry and thus anxious to provide the rules about positive and negative predication of the God with whom we can have an intimate relation and a deep experience. Here we see not only the plethora of denials of comprehension, but the prevalence of a grammar of divine naming that privileges denial or negation. These traditions have much in common, including a general preference for apprehension over comprehension and a signalling of the uniqueness of union with God by insisting on God's incomprehensibility. But in the tradition inflected by love it is more nearly the exception (e.g. Bonaventure) than the rule that relatively first-order accounts of experience of union are accompanied by instruction in the grammar of divine naming. Such rules can be uncovered in mystical theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux and John of the Cross, but they are not spelled out as they are in the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart; while Augustine can just as easily leave such grammatical considerations aside in his expressions of the journey of the soul to God and union.

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CHAPTER 20

TRINITARIAN INDWELLING

RIK VAN NIEUWENHOVE

THE theme of the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul is a complex topic, intersecting as it does with two central doctrinal areas. First, there is the theology of the Trinity, and more specifically, how to conceive of the historical missions of the Son and Holy Spirit in the world. These missions need to be interpreted in light of the intra-Trinitarian processions (i.e. the generation of the Word, and the procession of the Holy Spirit), and vice versa. Secondly, the theme of Trinitarian indwelling also involves a Christian-anthropological consideration. What are the theological-anthropological presuppositions facilitating the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul? What does it mean to have been made in the image of the Trinity, and how is that relevant in relation to our receptivity toward God's self-bestowal?

To tackle our topic I will discuss two major models of the Trinity, and then consider how each model coheres with the topic of Trinitarian indwelling. Both are inspired by St Augustine's *De Trinitate*, although Augustine developed only one of them in detail, namely the so-called 'psychological' or intrapersonal model. Scholars call the other model the social or interpersonal model, and it is usually associated with Richard of St Victor. This model witnessed a genuine revival in the twentieth century, and was enthusiastically adopted by many theologians because its deeply relational and communal dimensions are said to have the potential to nourish egalitarian understandings of Church and society. The distinction between the two models may have a certain heuristic value, which is why I adopt it in this contribution; in reality, however, it is not the case that the Trinitarian doctrine of each theologian fits neatly into one of these models, and the doctrine of some shares characteristics with both, such as for instance Bonaventure's (Van Nieuwenhove 2012: 215–22). I will begin my discussion with the interpersonal model. As I see it, however, the intrapersonal model may have a distinct advantage when we are dealing with the topic of Trinitarian indwelling in the soul.

THE INTERPERSONAL MODEL

Jürgen Moltmann is one of the twentieth-century theologians who has promoted the social model of the Trinity. This model sees the Trinity as a community of loving Persons. In characteristic vein, he claims that the Trinitarian Persons are ‘individual, unique, non-interchangeable subjects of the one, common divine substance, with consciousness and will’ (Moltmann 1981: 171). In order to avoid the charge of tri-theism he puts a distinct emphasis on divine perichoresis or mutual indwelling of the three divine Persons.

The relationality of the three Persons at the heart of the social model is seen as paradigmatic for human life and society. As he puts it: ‘the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession’ (Moltmann 1981: 198). These ideas proved highly influential and were immediately adopted by a whole range of theologians, including liberation and feminist theologians (e.g. Elizabeth Johnson, Patricia Wilson-Kastner). In his book *Trinity and Society* Leonardo Boff, for instance, draws out the political and ecclesial implications of the social doctrine of the Trinity as ‘the mystery of inclusion,’ considering it the basis for ‘social and integral liberation.’ He describes the communal aspects, as well as the emphasis upon the mutual indwelling or perichoresis of the divine Persons in the following terms:

The Trinitarian communion between the divine Three, the union between them in love and vital interpenetration, can serve as a source of inspiration... It speaks to the oppressed in their quest and struggle for integral liberation. The community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity. (Boff 1988: 6–7)

The interpersonal model has become so popular that it is now widely regarded as ‘the new orthodoxy’—although some have expressed, rightly in my view, serious reservations about the ‘projectionism’ at the heart of the social model of the Trinity (Kilby 2000). Before we examine some of these concerns, let us examine in some detail the historical origins of this interpersonal model.

At the end of *De Trinitate* 8.14 Augustine had suggested, somewhat casually, that love reveals a Trinitarian dimension: ‘love means someone loving and something loved with love. There you are with three, the lover, what is being loved, and love’ (1991: 255). He returns to it, albeit briefly, in 9.2, but abandons it soon in favour of the so-called psychological model (which I will discuss in the next section). It was Richard of St Victor (d. 1173) who seized upon Augustine’s cursory remarks, and developed them in his own work *De Trinitate*—a work Moltmann explicitly draws upon (Moltmann 1981: 173). According

to Richard, love entails an orientation towards the other; it wants to share itself. For love to flourish, it must be reciprocated; for it to be perfect, however, so Richard argues, it must have a triadic structure, for love between two persons is still in danger of remaining somewhat narcissistic. The ecstatic nature of love attains perfection when the love of two lovers finds expression in their one love for a co-beloved: 'each of the two persons, who is loved supremely and ought to love supremely, must seek with equal desire a third person mutually loved (*condilectum*) and must possess him freely with equal concord. Therefore, you see how the perfection of charity requires a Trinity of Persons' (*De Trin.* 3.11; 2010: 257).

Richard's solution to the problem how to distinguish between the three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, given the oneness of the divine nature, is a highly elegant one (*De Trin.* 5.16; 2010: 309–10): while he safeguards the unity of the divine nature by appealing to the notion that God is love (1 John 4: 8) he distinguishes between the divine Persons in terms of the origin of this love: the Father, as the origin of the Trinity, is the one who freely bestows love unto the others; the Son receives love and passes it on (cf. *Filioque*), with the Father, to the Holy Spirit (who is the ecstatic manifestation of the love of Father and Son); and the Holy Spirit is love received, who does not pass on love to another (fourth) Person. Thus, the Father is love freely bestowed (*amor gratuitus*); the Holy Spirit is love freely received (*amor debitus*); and the Son is a mixture of both (*ex utroque permixtus*). (Of course, this does not imply that the Holy Spirit does not love the other two Persons; but the Holy Spirit loves the other two Persons, and indeed us, with a love that is utterly received.)

While Richard's theology of the Trinity is both original (despite its remote origins in Augustine) and sophisticated, it faces a difficulty, which is of immediate relevance to the topic of this chapter. In order to explain this difficulty we need to recall Karl Rahner's concern that our statements about the immanent Trinity must be founded on the economic Trinity as revealed in the history of salvation (Rahner 1970: 22). In more traditional language: theology of the Trinity must assume that there is an intimate connection between the intra-Trinitarian generation of the Son and procession of the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and the divine missions of the Word and the Holy Spirit into our world, on the other hand: the latter (historical missions) reveal the former (intra-Trinitarian processions). Now, Richard can convincingly show the connection between the intra-Trinitarian spiration of the Holy Spirit, and the historical mission of the Holy Spirit who is sent into the world to dwell amongst believers: as the Holy Spirit is the ecstatic love of Father and Son within the Trinity, he is 'breathed out' into the hearts of Christians. To use Richard's own analogy (*De Trin.* 6.10; 2010: 328): as air is necessary for the life of the body, so too the Holy Spirit is necessary for a saintly life. The Holy Spirit is 'the one who is inspired [breathed into] into the hearts of the saints by the Father and the Son. He is the one who sanctifies men, so they may merit sainthood' (*De Trin.* 6.10; 2010: 329).

Richard's interpersonal model, however, does not allow us to square all that well the generation of the Son with his coming to dwell in the soul of believers: the connection

between the generation of the Word as Love-received-and-giving and the invisible mission into the soul remains somewhat unclear. It is no coincidence that, when he discusses the divine names of the Second Person of the Trinity (such as 'Word') and how he dwells in our world, Richard has recourse to the intrapersonal model (*De Trin.* 6.12; 2010: 330–2). In other words, the intrapersonal model may have a distinct advantage over its rival to make clear how the Son, and not just the Holy Spirit, dwells within the soul of the Christian. Richard himself admits the charge. Commenting on Romans 5: 5 'The love of God was poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who was given to us,' he writes (*De Trin.* 6.14; 2010: 334):

But why, I ask, does the Apostle say *through the Holy Spirit* rather than through the Father or Son? But we know that the Father does not have an originator or giver; hence, he can only have a gratuitous love. But, as we have said previously, the Son has both a gratuitous and owed love. And so, in the divine love we cannot be conformed to the property of the Son or the property of the Father, because we are not able to have both loves together, or even a gratuitous love alone, toward God. For how, I ask, can a creature love gratuitously his Creator, from who it has all that it has? And so, we are certainly conformed to the property of the Holy Spirit to the same extent that we return an owed love to our Creator.

In short, while Richard's model allows us to account for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, it is not clear how he can account for the indwelling of the Son within the soul, for 'we cannot have both a gratuitous and owed love'.

There are other concerns about this model, and some scholars have quite rightly questioned the new consensus surrounding it. There is, first, the issue of the accuracy of its reading of historical theology (Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove, 2011). The adherents of the social doctrine of the Trinity generally portray its rival model in one-dimensional terms, failing to do justice to the subtlety of its understanding of God (allegedly as 'mono-personal subject'), and often making unsustainable and simplistic contrasts between Western and Eastern-Orthodox portrayals of the Trinity, or between the treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*. Moreover, fashionable references to 'perichoresis' may not suffice to safeguard the integrity of monotheism within the social model if it characterizes the three Persons as distinct centres of consciousness and will (as Moltmann appears to do). Finally, there is, as Karen Kilby (2000: 441–3) has reminded us in a persuasive contribution, the problem of projectionism, if not of circularity: proponents of the interpersonal model are not simply in danger of attributing 'the individual author's or the larger society's latest ideals of how human beings should live in community' to their notion of God. Rather, the concept of perichoresis is first used to name the indescribable mystery of divine unity; this concept is then filled out 'rather suggestively with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness'. This is then, in turn, presented as an exciting resource to shape wider society and its understandings of relationships.

THE INTRAPERSONAL MODEL AND THE HUMAN PERSON AS IMAGE OF THE TRINITY

As indicated, twentieth-century theologians have subjected the so-called intrapersonal or psychological model to severe criticism. Moltmann, for instance, claims that it fails to be genuinely Trinitarian and remains caught up in a 'mono-personal' paradigm. Rahner makes a somewhat different point, and claims it conceives of 'the inner life of God [as] completely unrelated to us and to our Christian existence'; he alleges it fails to give sufficient weight to the historical and salvific experience of the Son and of the Holy Spirit as the reality of the divine self-communication to us, indulging in 'almost gnostic speculation about what goes on in the inner life of God' (Rahner 1997: 135). Later in this contribution we will have the opportunity to examine Rahner's own proposals. I am of the view, however, that Rahner's rather sweeping critique is somewhat unjustified, and I will substantiate this claim by examining Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the indwelling of the divine Persons in the soul.

Following Augustine, Aquinas focuses primarily on the divine processions, namely the generation of the Son as Word, and the procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son as Love. The following text captures Aquinas's ideas quite well. Having explained that in an intellectual nature there is an act of intellect and of will, he goes on to say:

The procession of the Word is by way of an intelligible operation. The operation of the will within ourselves involves also another procession, that of love, whereby the object loved is in the lover; as, by the conception of the word, the object spoken of or understood is in the intelligent agent. Hence, besides the procession of the Word in God, there exists in him another procession called the procession of love.

(ST I, q. 27, a. 3; 1981: 149)

Augustine had already used this psychological analogy to describe the mystery of the Trinity (*De Trin.* 9.18; 1991: 280–2): as an inner word (*verbum mentis*) is generated from the mind, and the will rejoices in this knowledge, so too the Word is generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds as the bond of Father and Son. Aquinas follows him in this, and, in the process, corrects some basic misunderstandings of Augustine by Peter Lombard (*I Sent.* d. 3.2.6; 2007: 23) and others (e.g. Bonaventure), who incorrectly assumed that Augustine drew an analogy between the three Persons, and three faculties (mind or *memoria*, intellect, and will). Aquinas quite rightly points out that Augustine did not consider *memoria* a distinct third faculty (ST I, q. 93, a. 7 *ad* 3; 1981: 475).

This important correction by Aquinas can be evaluated in different ways. On the one hand, it leads Aquinas to focus on the two divine processions, rather than on three divine Persons as the locus of our image-character, thereby perhaps fuelling later accusations of promoting a mono-personalist understanding of the mystery of the

Trinity. On the other hand, Peter Lombard's erroneous reading of Augustine may result in a somewhat static understanding of what it means to be made in the image of the Trinity (i.e. a static analogy between the divine Persons, and the three faculties), whereas Aquinas's approach (and that of St Augustine before him) is far more dynamic by focusing on the divine processions. More importantly for our purposes, the Augustinian-Thomist approach establishes an intimate connection between the intra-Trinitarian dynamics, and our participation in it through knowing and loving God:

As the uncreated Trinity is distinguished by the procession of the Word from the Speaker, and of Love from both of these (cf. *ST I*, q. 28, a.3); so we may say that in rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity.

(*ST I*, q. 93, a. 6; 1981: 473)

It is here that the significance of the 'psychological' analogy becomes fully clear. Unlike Richard's model (and present-day social Trinitarian thinkers) the psychological model allows for a fruitful connection between the theology of the Trinity and theological anthropology and spirituality. Put in a slightly different manner: there is an intimate link between the intra-divine life and the understanding of the human being as made in the image of God. In the words of D. Juvenal Merriell (2005: 137): 'the indwelling of the Trinity is basically the graced presence of God to the mind's faculties of intellect and will in a way that makes the intellect participate in the divine procession of the Word and the will participate in the divine procession of Love'. Let's examine the indwelling of the Trinity, as Aquinas construes it, in some more detail.

TRINITARIAN INDWELLING ACCORDING TO AQUINAS

Aquinas discusses the topic of the indwelling or inhabitation of the divine Persons in *ST I*, q. 43 (1981: 219ff.)—a question which deals with the mission of Son and Holy Spirit. This question is the final question in his treatise on the Trinity; it forms the climax of his discussion of Trinitarian theology, and provides a fitting turning-point to launch his treatise on creation (*ST I*, q. 44ff.)—for both creation and sanctification must be understood in light of the eternal generation of the Word, or Image (in whom all things have been made), and the spiration of the Holy Spirit, Love, or Gift (in whom all things have been given), as Aquinas suggests in *ST I*, q. 43, a. 2 (Emery 2006: 33–70).

While there is a visible mission of the Son (incarnation) and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3: 16; Acts 2) Aquinas seems more interested in this context in the invisible missions. Given the Trinitarian framework, there is no mission of the Father; only the Son and the Spirit are sent (*ST I*, q. 43, a. 4).

Article 3 of question 43, then, considers the relation between the invisible missions of the divine Persons and sanctifying grace. The text deserves to be quoted at length:

The divine person is fittingly sent in the sense that he exists newly in any one; and he is given as possessed by anyone; and neither of these is otherwise than by sanctifying grace. For God is in all things by his essence, power and presence, according to his one common mode, as the cause existing in the effects which participate in his goodness. Above and beyond this common mode, however, there is one special mode belonging to the rational nature wherein God is said to be present as the object known is in the knower, and the beloved in the lover. And since the rational creature by its operation of knowledge and love attains to God himself, according to this special mode God is said not only to exist in the rational creature but also to dwell therein as in his own temple. (1981: 221)

The question alludes to an important and controversial issue in medieval theology. In his first book of *Sentences* d. 17 Peter Lombard, inspired by Romans 5: 5, had identified the love which makes us love God with the Holy Spirit himself. Aquinas explicitly rejects this view (*ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 2; 1981: 1264; and *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.22.5), stating that it is only through sanctifying grace that the divine Persons dwell within us, and in no other way. Aquinas is worried that Peter's position will result in a flawed Christian anthropology: if charity is simply equated with the Holy Spirit, we become mere instruments of the Holy Spirit, in an entirely extraneous manner. As Aquinas interprets Peter Lombard's views, *we* no longer love but it is, rather, the Holy Spirit in us who loves (Van Nieuwenhove 2012: 153–4). Given these concerns, Aquinas prefers to argue that in receiving created grace we actually receive the Holy Spirit, whom we can enjoy (in the Augustinian sense of *fruitio Dei*). Thus we genuinely possess the Holy Spirit, albeit through the means of created grace.

As the quotation suggests, God dwells in all things through his act of creation; however, he dwells in rational creatures (angels and humans) in a special manner, 'as the object known is in the knower, and the beloved in the lover'. This phrase illustrates how the topic of Trinitarian indwelling in the soul hinges on the connection between theology of the Trinity and the Christian understanding of the human person as made in the image of God: there is a harmonious 'fit' between the generation of the Word and the spiration of the Holy Spirit or Love, on the one hand, and the full attainment of our image-character (what it really means to be fully human, or made in the image of God) in our knowing and loving God, on the other hand. In accordance with his adage that grace perfects nature, Aquinas explains that the indwelling of Son and Holy Spirit perfect the operations of intellect and will, which already constitute an inchoative participation in the intra-Trinitarian processions.

Charity plays a central role in the assimilation of the soul to God. Through the bestowal of charity the soul becomes assimilated to the Holy Spirit. In a beautiful passage from *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.21.3 (1975: 122) Aquinas writes: 'since the charity by which we love God in us is by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit himself must also be in us, so long as charity is in us. And so the Apostle says: "Know you not that you are the

temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16).’ The Holy Spirit makes us ‘lovers of God’ (*amatores Dei*), and because ‘every beloved is in the lover as such,’ Aquinas (appealing to 1 John 4: 16) goes on to say that ‘by the Holy Spirit not only is God in us, but we also are in God’ (*Summa contra Gentiles* 4.21.4; 1975: 122). Indeed, as we become friends of God through the bestowal of charity, we are allowed to share in the mysteries of God himself—for ‘it is the proper mark of friendship that one reveal his secrets to his friend’ (*Summa contra Gentiles* 4.21.5; 1975: 123) and to share what one has (*Summa contra Gentiles* 4.21.7). Again, because Aquinas describes the virtue of charity in terms of an intimate friendship between God and the human person, he sees the bestowal of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (*ST I-II*, q. 68, a. 5; 1981: 881–2) as an invitation to share in God’s own life. The seven gifts are: for the apprehension of truth: understanding (which perfects the speculative intellect) and counsel (which perfects practical reason); for making proper judgements: knowledge (which perfects practical reason) and wisdom (which perfects speculative reason); while piety, fortitude, and fear perfect the appetitive power (*ST I-II* q. 68, a. 4; 1981: 880–1).

Within the confines of this contribution I cannot examine these gifts in any detail; let us just pause and briefly examine the cognitive gifts. It is instructive to contrast the gift of wisdom (appended in the *Secunda Secundae* to the theological virtue of charity) with the gift of knowledge and understanding (connected more specifically with the virtue of faith). While all seven gifts are from the Holy Spirit, the gifts of knowledge and understanding are, given their specific intellectual character, appropriated to the indwelling of the Son, in accordance with Aquinas’s overall ‘psychological’ approach (*ST I*, q. 43, a. 5 *ad* 1 and 2; 1981: 222). The gift of knowledge (*scientia*) refers to sound judgement as to what is to be believed of the things of faith. The gift of understanding (*intellectus*) enlightens our mind and assists our intellect in penetrating the things of faith (*ST II-II*, q. 8; 1981: 1198ff.). The gift of wisdom (*sapientia*) implies, further, ‘a kind of union’ with the things we believe (*ST II-II*, q. 9, a. 2 *ad* 1; 1981: 1205). It is therefore linked with charity—the friendship between God and humans—because the gift of wisdom establishes a kind of connaturality with things divine (*ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 2; 1981: 1375). It unites us with God in an intimate manner, and it shapes both our contemplation of God, as well as our active life (*ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 3). (Wisdom, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, implies an intimacy with God which distinguishes it from wisdom as an intellectual virtue we acquire through our own efforts.) In short, given the centrality of charity, through which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are bestowed, an intimate union occurs between God and soul: through the Holy Spirit God dwells in us, and we dwell in God.

We are now in a position to return to some of the criticism levelled earlier. It seems to me that Rahner and other critics fail to see that in Aquinas’s view we come to know and experience the revelation of the triune God by participating, through the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, that is, the economy of salvation (Levering 2004: 110–43). In relation to the priority of the discussion of the immanent Trinity, one needs to remember that creation and salvation find, in reality, their origin in, and are an extension of, the intra-divine processions of Son and Holy Spirit (*ST I*, q. 45, a. 6; 1981: 237–8).

As the immanent processions are the cause of creation and sanctification, a discussion of the former therefore precedes an outline of the latter. Finally, it will have become clear that, for Aquinas, the indwelling of the divine Persons results in a lived encounter that involves a transformation of the whole human person in light of the gift of God's grace. Indeed, even theological activity itself requires a share of the divine indwelling (if only because it requires the theological virtue of faith and, ideally, the gifts of understanding and wisdom).

Aquinas offers a high point in scholastic theology and spirituality. Outside of the university setting other mystical theologians, often writing in the vernacular, also expounded how the divine Persons dwell in us. I will now discuss one of these.

RUUSBROEC AND OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF THE TRINITY THROUGH THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Throughout his works (written in Middle-Dutch) Jan van Ruusbroec (d. 1381), although not an academic theologian, developed a spirituality which was nonetheless deeply theologically informed. In order to expound his ideas, I will proceed in a similar manner as earlier, outlining, first, his theology of the Trinity, and then his Trinitarian anthropology, so as to discuss how the Trinity dwells in us and how we participate in the intra-Trinitarian dynamics.

Ruusbroec's theology of the Trinitarian God, whom he describes in *The Spiritual Espousals*, b1148 (2014: 197) as 'a flowing, ebbing sea', must rank as one of the most dynamic ones in the Western tradition. Speaking of 'the sublime fruitful nature of God', he writes in his first work, *The Realm of Lovers* 1597–1618; 2014: 117):

this noble nature, which is the principal cause of all creatures, is fruitful. Therefore it cannot rest in the unity of the Fatherhood, because of the stirring of fruitfulness; but it must without cease give birth to the eternal Wisdom, that is, the Son of the Father. . . . Neither out of the fruitful nature, that is, Fatherhood, nor out of the Father's giving birth to his Son does Love, that is, the Holy Spirit flow; but out of the fact that the Son was born a Person other than the Father, where the Father beholds him as born, and everything one with him as the life of everything, and the Son, in turn, beholds the Father giving birth and fruitful, and himself, and all things, in the Father—this is seeing and seeing-back in a fruitful nature—from this comes a Love, that is, the Holy Spirit, and it is a bond from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father.

From Bonaventure Ruusbroec adopts the notion that the Father generates the Son out of the fruitfulness of his divine nature (*bonum diffusivum sui*), and from the mutual contemplation of Father and Son, the Holy Spirit proceeds as their bond of Love. This passage further suggests that creation can only be understood in light of the generation of the

Son by the Father. This is standard medieval fare in the Bonaventurian tradition. However, Ruusbroec then makes an original move in the sentence that immediately follows this passage:

By this Love, the Persons are embraced and penetrated and are made to flow back into that unity out of which the Father without cease is giving birth. Now, even though they are made to flow back into unity, there is no abiding, on account of nature's fruitfulness. This giving-birth and this flowing-back into unity is the work of the Trinity. (*Realm of Lovers*, 1619–23; 2014 :117)

Ruusbroec, therefore, sees the Holy Spirit as the principle of the return (Latin: *regratio*; Middle-Dutch: *wederboeghen*) of the divine Persons in their shared unity. It belongs to the nature of Love to receive and return out of sheer gratuity, thereby creating a never-ending dynamic of giving and receiving. The whole economy of salvation, and our response to it in grace, can therefore be interpreted in light of this bestowal and return of the Holy Spirit as Love (Van Nieuwenhove 2003: 136–8).

In short, there are three moments in the life of the Trinity: there is an active out-going moment (i.e. the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit); there is the moment of return (i.e. through the embrace of the Holy Spirit the divine Persons return into the divine unity); and, finally, there is the moment of perichoretic fruition in the shared unity. From here, given the fecundity of the divine nature, the process starts all over again, in a never-ending, pulsating dynamic.

These intra-divine movements are reflected in Ruusbroec's Trinitarian anthropology. Ruusbroec, following Peter Lombard and Bonaventure, identifies three faculties in the soul: mind, intellect, and will. The memory or mind (reflecting the role of the Father) as the ground of the soul, can engage with the outside world through reason and will; it can, however, also repose idly when it turns away from the activity and multiplicity of the external world. Again, our reason (mirroring the Word) is usually occupied with external things, but it too can turn within and rest in non-activity. The will, finally, permeates the faculties, and inclines them towards their source, mirroring the role of the Holy Spirit as principle of the return of the divine Persons. In this return the faculties rest in enjoyment. The analogy with the life of the Trinity is clear: in both cases there is an out-going, in-going, and a fruitive dimension.

In his first work, *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec outlines the transformation of our natural Trinitarian orientation through the bestowal of faith, hope, and love, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is these gifts which will transform us, and make us participate in the life of the Trinity through the three 'lives' Ruusbroec distinguishes. First, there is the active life, which is a life of practical self-disciplining of the soul and charitable engagement with the external world, thus mirroring the out-going dimension of the intra-divine life (the processions of Son and Holy Spirit). Secondly, there is the interior life of devotion and desire for God, which reflects the return of the divine Persons into their unity. The contemplative life, thirdly, is a life in which we 'enjoy' or 'rest in' God, again mirroring the fruition of the divine Persons in their shared unity. This combination of the three lives—the active, inner, and contemplative—constitutes the 'common

life' in which the Christian is both active and contemplative; this common life mirrors the life of the Trinity in its fullness, in its active and fruitive dimensions.

In *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec weaves a rich tapestry, involving intricate discussions of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, beatitudes, and angelic choirs to describe how grace moulds us toward participation in the life of the Trinity. Within the confines of this chapter, I can only sketch the role of the gifts in this process.

Loving fear, the first gift he discusses, encourages us to do the will of God, in obedience and self-renunciation. Benevolence, the second gift (Latin: *pietas*) is also associated with the active life; it disposes us to consider all those who are in need or distress, and urges us to engage in works of mercy. Thirdly, the gift of knowledge supports the person in the active life to discern the needs of others, and how to best come to their aid. It further instils humility in us that comes with genuine self-knowledge.

The gift of fortitude adorns us in the interior or God-yearning life. It elevates the mind above all temporal things, assists reason in considering the truth of God, and the will to incline itself towards the goodness of God. The gift of counsel is bestowed on us by the birth of the Son in our mind (an Eckhartian theme), which instils a deeper yearning and restlessness for God.

The gifts of understanding and wisdom adorn a life of contemplation of God (*een God scouwende leven*). How to interpret the nature of the contemplative life is a matter of debate amongst Ruusbroec scholars. According to some, Ruusbroec describes a mystical experience, characterized by passivity and immediacy. In my view, the language of 'resting in' and 'enjoying' God, which Ruusbroec uses to describe the contemplative life, must be understood in accordance with the distinction Augustine draws (in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *De Trinitate*) between using things and enjoying God (a distinction Ruusbroec explicitly refers to in *The Spiritual Espousals*, a766; 2014: 164). In those texts Augustine had argued that only God should be enjoyed, which means that only God should be our ultimate concern in life. (Treating a created thing as your ultimate concern would constitute a kind of idolatry.) Ruusbroec adopts this notion of fruition of God, and explains it by arguing that we need a theocentric focus (*meyninghe*) in everything we do. We attain this radical theocentricity, in which the enjoyment of God consists, through a disposition of radical self-transcendence (Van Nieuwenhove 2003: 170–4).

As I indicated earlier, the contemplative life does not constitute the pinnacle of the spiritual life for Ruusbroec. This is, rather, a harmonious combination of the active, interior, and contemplative lives, which Ruusbroec calls the *ghemeyne leven*, usually translated as 'the common life' but perhaps better translated as the 'universal' or 'catholic' life. The mature Christian will thus engage in virtuous activity (thereby mirroring the 'activity' of the divine Persons in the bosom of the Trinity) and also 'rest' in God (just like the divine Persons 'rest' in their perichoretic unity). This is how he describes this integration of activity and rest in the common life:

God's Spirit breathes us out to love and perform virtuous works, and he draws us back into him to rest and enjoy: this is an eternal life, just like in our bodily life we breathe air in and out... to go *in*, in idle enjoyment, and to go *out* with works, and

always remaining united with God's Spirit: that is what I mean. Just like we open and close our bodily eyes, so quick that we do not feel it, likewise we die in God and live from God, and constantly remain one with God. Thus we will *go out* into our ordinary life and *go in* with love and cleave to God, and always remain *united* with God in stillness. (*The Seven Rungs*, 1121–32, my emphasis and tr.; 2014: 622)

Once we realize that the contemplative aspect of enjoyment of God refers to a theocentric focus or intention we can begin to understand how this aspect can be combined with a life of virtue. Fruition of God refers to a radical theocentric focus in all our activities and practices (be they acts of virtue or more devotional acts). As Ruusbroec puts it succinctly: 'therefore he has a common life, for contemplation and action come just as readily to him and he is perfect in both' (*The Sparkling Stone*, 948–9; 2014: 258).

In summary, through the theological virtues and the bestowal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit there is a mutual indwelling of God and soul. Thus the soul comes to share in the life of the Trinity through its very engagement with the world in charitable activity, all the while remaining anchored in God ('resting' or 'enjoying' God), through a radical theocentric focus or intention.

The perceptive reader will have noted that Ruusbroec combines elements of both Trinitarian models in his mystical theology: with the interpersonal model he accepts that there are three faculties in the soul, which mirror the three divine Persons, namely mind, intellect, and will. However, with the intrapersonal model, he focuses on a psychological analogy, identifying three movements (going out, return, and fruition) which mirror the threefold intra-Trinitarian dynamic.

RAHNER ON TRINITARIAN INDWELLING

In what is perhaps his most personal work, *Encounters with Silence*, a prayerful meditation or dialogue with God, Karl Rahner, widely regarded as the most important Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, quotes one source outside of scripture, namely Ruusbroec. It concerns a passage in which Ruusbroec describes his ideal of the common life, encouraging us to engage with the world while, at the same time, resting in God. It is little surprise that 'this vital passage' was to appeal to Rahner, and that he reread it throughout his life, for Rahner's own spirituality is one which centres on the ideal of Ignatian contemplation in action, an ideal which is similar to the common life Ruusbroec promoted.

Rahner (1981: 149) famously remarked that the future Christian would be a mystic, if she were to exist at all. Mystical experience, however, should not be primarily understood in terms of a passive and immediate union with God (Van Nieuwenhove 2004). Rahner does not deny the possibility of this kind of direct experience of the divine, although he calls it 'an obscure and mysterious matter' which only those who enjoyed it can talk about (Rahner, 1982: 86). Instead, Rahner is more interested in 'the mysticism of

everyday life'. He draws attention to the fact that in our acts of knowledge and freedom, when engaging with individual objects of everyday experience (what he calls 'categorical experience') we are always also surrounded by a horizon of boundless mystery, which is actually the condition of possibility of everyday knowing and wanting (the 'transcendental experience'). This is the hidden mystery in the midst of everyday life (Rahner 1979: 6–31). As he puts it:

This transcendental experience of human transcendence is not the experience of some definite, particular objective thing which is experienced alongside of other objects. It is rather a basic mode of being which is prior to and permeates every objective experience. ... It is ... the a priori openness of the subject to being as such, which is present precisely when a person experiences himself as involved in the multiplicity of cares and concerns and fears and hopes of his everyday world.

(Rahner 1997: 34–5)

How then does the Trinitarian God communicate himself to us in this transcendental experience? Rahner puts it as follows:

This self-communication of God has a three-fold aspect. It is the self-communication in which that which is given remains sovereign, incomprehensible, continuing, ever as received, to dwell in its uncontrollable, incomprehensible originality. [This is the self-communication of God as Father.] It is a self-communication in which the God who manifests himself 'is there' as self-uttered truth and as freely, historically disposing sovereignty. [This is the self-communication of God as Son.] It is a self-communication, in which the God who communicates himself causes in the one who receives him the act of loving welcome ... [This is the self-communication of God as Holy Spirit.] (Rahner 1970: 37)

We need to understand this threefold communication of God in both historical and transcendental terms. In this Rahner is much closer than he himself acknowledges to traditional accounts, such as Aquinas's, who, as we saw earlier, claimed that there are both visible (or historical) and invisible (or sanctifying) missions. Again, in broad agreement with the tradition, Rahner focuses primarily upon the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when he discusses our transcendental experience of God. I conclude my outline of Rahner's contribution with a short discussion of this topic.

How do we experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us? In *The Spirit in the Church* Rahner attempts to answer this question. After he has reiterated that transcendental experience, when mediated through an actual categorical object, is always divine experience in the midst of everyday life, he makes the point that there are actual life-experiences which open up the possibility of an experience of the Spirit. He gives an extensive and poignant sample. When we discover that we can forgive somebody, or renounce something truly dear to us, though we receive no recognition for it; when we try to love God, 'although no response of love seems to come from God's silent

incomprehensibility'; when we engage in utterly selfless deeds without any prospect of even a mere acknowledgement; or

when the fragmentary experience of love, beauty, and joy is experienced and accepted purely and simply as the promise of love, beauty, and joy, without their being understood in ultimate scepticism as a cheap form of consolation for some final deception; where the bitter, deceptive, and vanishing everyday world is withstood until the accepted end, and accepted out of a force whose ultimate source is still unknown to us but can be tapped by us; ... where one lets oneself go unconditionally and experiences this capitulation as true victory ... there is God and his liberating grace. There we find what we Christians call the Holy Spirit of God.

(Rahner 1979: 21–2)

The dialectic of incomprehensible mystery and acceptance or surrender operative in these experiences reveals a Trinitarian dimension: in the midst of our confusion, or perhaps even despair over afflictions, we encounter the mystery of the Father, while the Holy Spirit assists us to surrender to this mystery in light of the invitation of his incarnate Son. In the words of William V. Dych (1992: 160): because Rahner 'saw God not just as different from the world but also one with it, he was able to point to all human experience as offering an encounter with God'. As Rahner (1979: 27) himself puts it: the experience of the Spirit does not happen 'as meditation proper, in self-immersive inward communion', but rather 'in the warp and weft of everyday life, where responsibility, loyalty, love, and so on are practiced absolutely'.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter I first recalled the distinction between two models of the Trinity: the so-called social or interpersonal model, and the psychological or intrapersonal model. How we conceive of the indwelling of the Trinity will be determined by the extent to which we espouse one of these models. I have argued that the social model, although rather fashionable in current theology, may not be as suitable as the intrapersonal model to account for the indwelling in the soul of the divine Persons and the Son in particular. The intrapersonal model, on the other hand, can account for a genuine indwelling of both the Son and Holy Spirit. Perhaps, however, we should refrain from committing to just one specific model, and allow for a diversity of approaches to explain how God dwells in us, and we in God. Richard of St Victor and Aquinas are paradigmatic exponents of the inter- and intrapersonal models respectively. Similarly, while many of today's theologians enthusiastically espouse the social model, especially feminist and liberation theologians, Rahner both adopts and ingeniously reinvents the psychological model, drawing on his transcendental approach, and demonstrates its relevance for people today. Ruusbroec, on the other hand, is harder to place: he borrows elements

from both models: in accordance with the medieval interpersonal model, he accepts that there are three faculties, mirroring the three divine Persons. However, he also develops a psychological analogy of some kind, that is, between the movements of the divine Persons (in terms of out-going, in-going, and fruitive rest) and the three faculties (in their out-going, in-going, and restful moments). And perhaps there is a lesson in this: if current Trinitarian theology and spirituality want to do full justice to the rich theme of Trinitarian indwelling (as it should), it may not be best served by dichotomous approaches in its doctrinal models of the Trinity.

SUGGESTED READING

Emery (2006); Kilby (2000); Van Nieuwenhove (2001, 2012).

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CHAPTER 21

MYSTICAL UNION

BERNARD MCGINN

INTRODUCTION

IN the middle of the thirteenth century a Flemish Cistercian nun, Beatrice of Nazareth, wrote the earliest surviving vernacular mystagogical treatise, designed to lead advanced souls to God. This work, *The Seven Ways of Love* (*Seuen manniren van minne*), poetic, dense, and difficult as it may be, is also strangely moving. At the end of the last of the tempestuous seven ways, conceived of as various manifestations of the overwhelming power of *minne*, the soul looks forward to entering into the joy of the Lord, as Beatrice says, quoting Augustine.¹ She goes on: ‘There the soul will be united with its Bridegroom and become one spirit with Him (*een geest met heme*) in inseverable Minne and eternal fidelity’ (*Seven Ways of Minne*, 7.255–8; Huls 2013: 70–1). Being united with the Divine Bridegroom to become one spirit with Him, implicitly citing 1 Corinthians 6: 17, ‘He who adheres to the Lord, is one spirit’ (*Qui autem adhaeret Domino, unus spiritus est*), is a hallmark of Cistercian mysticism. The text from 1 Corinthians is also the most frequently cited scriptural proof text for what modern scholars speak of as mystical union.

Four preliminary issues must be kept in mind before putting Beatrice’s reference to union in historical context. The first is that the technical term ‘*mystical union*’ (*unio mystica*), although employed by a few patristic authors, was actually very rarely used for more than a millennium (c.500–1550), despite how often mystics spoke of being united with God. The qualifier ‘mystical’ (*mysticus*), whose Christian usage goes back to the second century CE, kept its etymological sense of ‘secret/hidden’, and was used to describe the inner, invisible, aspects of Christian life and practice, especially the spiritual meaning of scripture, its *sensus mysticus*. *Mysticus* was also applied to rituals, to prayer and contemplation, and even to theology (*theologia mystikê*) by Dionysius, who wrote about 500 CE. Dionysius was also one of the few patristic authorities to use the expression

¹ The most recent edition, translation, and study is Huls (2013). In the *Seven Ways of Minne*, 7.249–51, Beatrice quotes Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.10 (18).

'mystical union'. The second issue concerns the preliminary and imperfect character of all forms of union that can be attained in this life. The Christian mystics always insisted on the eschatological nature of union, that is, only in the life to come will union with God be fully realized. A third issue regards the duration of union. Most mystics taught that the grace of mystical union was temporary and transient. Some, however, held out the possibility for states of habitual union.

The fourth preliminary remark concerns the place of union language within the broad field of the forms of expression used by Christian mystics to describe their special consciousness of God. Speaking of becoming one with God has a privileged status among these expressions, due in part to its scriptural basis, but the mystics had a wide range of other terms that they used in conjunction with union language when they talked about attaining contact with God. Many of these terms also had (or found) a scriptural basis. For example, contemplation (*contemplatio/theôria*) is connected to the beatitude, 'Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God' (Matt. 5: 8), as well as to the biblical language about seeing 'the face of God' (e.g. Ps. 27: 7–10; 1 Cor. 13: 12). The motif of being born of God, even of having God born in us, is another field of mystical discourse suggested by passages in the New Testament (e.g. John 3: 5, Rom. 6: 4) (Mieth 1980). Deification (*theôsis/deificatio*) was used to express the effect of a deep relation with God. Deification could appeal to some biblical texts (e.g. Ps. 81: 6 and 2 Pet. 1: 4), but is fundamentally rooted in the economy of salvation, understood, according to the famous saying of Irenaeus, that 'God became man so that man could become God' (*Adversus haereses* 3.19.1; also see Des Places et al. 1967). Other types of language used transposed sense experience, such as tasting God—'Taste and see the sweetness of the Lord' (Ps. 33: 9), or touching God. Employing the Pauline text from Philippians 3: 13 about 'straining forward to what lies ahead', as well as other passages ('They that eat me, shall yet hunger', Si. 24: 29), mystics spoke of attaining God as a state of satisfaction that was at one and the same time an intense desire for deeper penetration into the divine mystery that always exceeds the limits of created being—what Gregory of Nyssa called *epektasis*. In other words, while becoming one with God has had a central role in the history of Christian mystical theology, it is not, as some modern students of mysticism seem to suppose, the defining characteristic of the mystical tradition. There were many ways in which the mystics addressed the paradoxical task of trying to say the unsayable, to hint at forms of consciousness that can be suggested, but not captured in words.

For a believer to become united with God was only one among the forms of *unitas*, as several mystics make clear. Such treatments are useful for pointing out what mystical union is and what it is not. In Bernard of Clairvaux's *On Consideration* (*De consideratione*), the treatise he wrote to his former monk now Pope Eugene III, in the midst of a discussion of the unity of the Trinity, the abbot distinguishes eight kinds of unity found in the created world from 'the supreme, and may I say, unique oneness (*unice unum*), when consubstantiality makes the unity' (*De consideratione* 5.8.18–19; Leclercq et al. 1963: 482–3, my tr.). The created unities are the collective unity of a pile of stones, the constituted unity of a body and its parts, conjugal unity of man and wife, the natural unity of flesh and spirit in a person, and the moral unity by which a person tries to be

true and stable. The three highest forms are the unity of accord (*unitas consentanea*) ‘when through charity among many persons there is one heart and one mind’ (Acts 4: 32). Then comes mystical union, which Bernard rather unusually calls *unitas votiva*, explaining it as ‘when the soul, adhering to God with all its desires (*omnibus votivis*) becomes one spirit’, referencing 1 Corinthians 6: 17 again. Above this union of the created spirit with the Uncreated Spirit, there is still one higher unity here below, the unity of condescension (*unitas dignativa*) by which the Word takes up human nature into one person. What is clear is that while Bernard sees loving union, or *unus spiritus*, as the highest uniting possible for a human person, it must be kept distinct from the unique union of the Trinity and the special union enjoyed by the Godman. Some other mystics were not so sure about this distinction and made claims that humans might come to share in the very oneness of the Trinity.

THREE MODELS AND THEIR BIBLICAL BASIS

To present the story of the different understandings of uniting with God, we can distinguish three different models of mystical union in the Christian tradition with their respective bases in the Bible (McGinn 2016a: 59–86; 2012: 200–10). These models are first of all, the *unus spiritus/unitas spiritus* model in which God and human unite in spirit, that is, in willing one and the same thing. This union is often expressed as the union of the kiss, because it is frequently cast in the language of human sexual uniting.² The second model is that of the Trinitarian union in which the human person comes in some way to share in the life of the three divine Persons, in what Bernard called their *summum atque unice unum*. The third model is the union of indistinction, that is, union understood as a merging with God that leaves all distinction behind, at least on some level. We can call this *unitas indistinctionis*. Although the three models are distinct, having differing trajectories, they are ideal types and therefore have often interacted in history. Some mystics are pure examples of the *unitas spiritus* model, which has been the dominant form. In other mystics, however, the notion of a loving union between the soul and God coexists with language of becoming one with the Trinity, or even of coming into a state of indistinction with God.

The roots of Christian conceptions of uniting with God are found in the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament read in the light of the New, that is, through its Christological lens (Dupuy 1992: 40–61; Haas 2004: 48–63). The New Testament conviction that God’s sending his Only-Begotten Son into the world makes possible new ways of relating to God—of seeing the Father through the Son, of becoming one with the Son and therefore a child of God, of having the life of the incarnate Son of God within us. Especially in the Johannine and Pauline literature, salvation is often expressed in terms

² For some reflections on the mystical and non-mystical uses of *unitas spiritus*, see Sergent (2015: 144–70).

of union with Jesus Christ, who has been established as Redeemer through his death and resurrection. Jesus's last discourse in John 14 to 17 is especially rich in passages about Christ's union with his followers. These come in the form of the promise that the Spirit will come and live within the disciples (John 14: 16–17), as well as in vegetative metaphors (e.g. 'I am the vine and you are the branches': John 15: 5), and in expressions of a union of friendship (John 15: 14–15). Most daringly, Jesus prays that his followers will come to share in the unity he has with his Father: 'As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us' (John 17: 21). This was an important proof text for both Trinitarian and indistinct understandings of mystical union.

Language of union is also strong in Paul. Being 'in Christ' (*en Christo*) is one of the central motifs in the Pauline corpus.³ Believers become one with Christ in many ways—in baptism, in the eucharist, and in their inner identification with the crucified one. In Galatians 2: 19–20, a text often cited by the mystics, Paul says, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me.' Paul also talks of the believer being 'in God' (Rom. 2: 17, 5: 11; 1 Thess. 2: 2), or of God being 'in us' (1 Cor. 14: 25; 2 Cor. 6: 16). Not only is Christ one with us, but Paul speaks of the Spirit living within us (e.g. Rom. 5: 5, 8: 9 and 11; Gal. 4: 6). Another passage frequently cited by the mystics is 2 Corinthians 3: 17–18, where the Apostle says, 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.' Finally, there is 1 Corinthians 6: 17 itself, a text which comes as an aside in the midst of an attack on fornication as making a person one body with a prostitute. Paul did not seem to intend this in what we may call a mystical sense, but it was read that way in the tradition.

Many passages of the Old Testament were also understood as referring to the union of Christ and the believer. Predominant among these was the Song of Songs, a series of passionate love poems, which both Jews and Christians read as the message of God's love for his people coded in the language of the amorous relations of the bride and bridegroom. For the Jews this means God and the community of Israel; for Christians Christ and the Church. By extension, however, the loving relation of male and female could be applied to all the members of the community, so that the bride's sexual union with the bridegroom and the language of their wooing were seen as transferred descriptions of the game of love between the human soul (*anima* as feminine) and Christ. Origen, the first Christian mystical commentator on the Song of Songs, initiated this tradition when he said 'the divine scriptures make use of homonyms, that is to say, they use identical terms for describing different things ... so that you will find the names of the members of the body transferred to those of the soul, or rather the faculties and powers of the soul are to be called its members' (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue; Lawson 1957: 26–7). What this meant in practice was that the bodily and erotic images of the Song of Songs were to be read as teaching the soul how to come to union with the Divine Bridegroom through the awakening of its 'spiritual senses', that is, the soul's

³ The importance of the phrase 'in Christ' was stressed by Alfred Schweitzer (1931: 122–9).

interior organs of mystical knowledge, as they have been called (Rahner 1979: 97). This erotic model was the major, but not the only, form of the *unitas spiritus* mode of presenting mystical union.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Patristic Period

Origen, the Alexandrian catechist (c.185–254) and the first mystical theologian, forms a good starting point, not only because he established both the ecclesiological and the personal reading of the Song of Songs, but also because he has a developed teaching on union. The three surviving books of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, as well as his two homilies, interpret the images of the Song, such as the kiss of the mouth (Song 1: 1a), the taste of the breasts (Song 1: 1b, 1: 3c, 4: 10), and the wound of love (Song 2: 5, 4: 9) in ways that are both cognitive in providing deeper knowledge of God and affective in indicating the soul's yearning for the Divine Lover. Origen uses different forms of language to express the relation between the two, including deification and birthing, but he frequently speaks of union, sometimes citing 1 Corinthians 6: 17. For example, commenting on Song 2: 10–13, he says: 'For the Word of God would not otherwise say she was his neighbor did he not join himself to her and become one spirit with her' (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3; Lawson 1957: 239–40). Although Origen uses the term *henôsis* ('oneing'), later applied to forms of indistinct union, his understanding of union is based on a clear distinction between Creator and creature and takes as its model the union of lovers in the Song of Songs.

Origen's notion of loving union is found in later patristic mystics, both of East and West. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) also commented on the Song of Songs and spoke about the Song as describing a marriage which figures 'the union of the human soul with God'. 'By clinging to the Lord,' Gregory continues, 'he might become one spirit through a union (*anakrasis*) with what is pure and free from passion and have a pure mind instead of being burdened with the flesh's weight' (Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, homily 1; McCambley 1987: 47). Nonetheless, Gregory's notion of union is different from Origen's because any union the soul attains is always provisional due to the *epektasis* by which the soul attains a unitive rest in God that is, at the same time, a yearning for deeper contact. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) made the Song of Songs the centre of the hermeneutics of his deeply Platonic account of the soul's ascent to God through ecstasy (*excessus mentis*) (see esp. *De Isaac, or On the Soul* 4.14, 5.46, 6.51, 6.72–3, 7.59, and 8.78). Ambrose was familiar with the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (d. 270), but he deliberately avoided the Neoplatonist's notion of achieving identity with the divine One (*henôsis*) by stressing a transformed erotic union with God, what he called a 'spiritual coupling' (*copula spiritualis*) that characterizes how the soul is united to God in matrimony (Ambrose, *On Death as a Good* 5.20; see also *Exposition on Psalm 118*

22.36). Ambrose's sometime catechumen, Augustine, was a major figure in the history of mysticism, but is not of great importance for the theme of mystical union. Possibly in reaction to Plotinian identity-union, the bishop of Hippo avoided speaking of uniting with God, as can be seen in his mystical accounts of *seeing* 'the unchanging Light above the soul's eye' (*Confessions* 7.10.16; my tr.), or the mental ascent to briefly 'touch divine Wisdom with the whole beat of the heart' (*Confessions* 9.10.23–6; my tr.).

These Western patristic authors avoided any hint of the language of merging with the highest source, whether conceived as the Plotinian One, or as the Christian Trinity. The same was not true of some of the Eastern Fathers. The fifty *Spiritual Homilies* ascribed to the Egyptian monk Macarius were probably produced in a Syrian milieu late in the fourth century. They contain the earliest use of the term 'mystical union/communion', as for example, in *Homily* 15.2: 'So also [is] a person whom Christ, the heavenly Spouse, has asked to be his bride in a mystical and divine communion (*mystikên koinônian*). Such a one has tasted the heavenly riches and ought with great diligence to strive sincerely to please the Bridegroom, Christ' (Pseudo-Macarius, *The Great Letter*; Maloney 1992: 108) (adapted); see also *Homilies* 10.2, 47.17, and *The Great Letter* 2 (Maloney 1992: 257).

Another important early monastic figure, Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) is the first Christian witness to a teaching on union that moves in the direction of merging with God in indistinction. Evagrius constructed an impressive mystical theology on a largely Origenist foundation, sketching out three levels in the return of the fallen soul to its source in the Trinity. As he summarized in the treatise *Praktikos*: 'Christianity is the dogma of Christ our Savior. It is composed of *praktikê* [i.e. ascetic living], of the contemplation of the physical world [i.e. *physikê*], and of the contemplation of God [i.e. *theologikê*]' (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 1; Bamberger 1970: 15). The ascent of the *nous*, or mind, through 'pure prayer' leads towards the 'essential gnosis' that is the Holy Trinity itself. Without entering into the details of Evagrius's speculation, it is important to note that essential gnosis involves both a uniting with the three Persons of the Trinity,⁴ as well as a merging of all minds back into their source in the Father. A passage in his *Letter to Melania* is quite direct in affirming an eschatological 'oneness without distinction':

When minds flow back to him like torrents into the sea, he changes them all completely into his own nature, color and taste. They will no longer be many but one in his unending and inseparable unity, because they are united and joined to him. And as in the fusion of rivers with the sea no addition in nature or variation in its color or taste is to be found, so also in the fusion of minds with the Father no duality of nature or quaternity of Persons comes about.

(Evagrius, *Letter to Melania* 6; Parmentier 1985: 13)

⁴ Evagrius's *Letter to Melania* 5 discusses how all three aspects of the human person (*nous*, or mind, soul, and body) attain union with each of the three divine Persons: 'just as the nature of the human mind will be united to the Father, . . . so too the names "soul" and "body" will be absorbed in the Persons of the Son and Spirit, and will remain continually one nature and three Persons of God and his image' (Parmentier 1985: 12; also see Bunge 1986).

The mysterious Eastern monk who wrote under the biblical pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17: 34) sometime around the year 500 CE not only invented the term mystical theology, but also presented an influential account of the great process of the divine *Erôs* by which all creation comes forth from God's yearning love for the world and then returns to him by means of the same energy (*Divine Names* 4). The return of the intellectual soul makes use of three processes: the symbolic theology of scripture and ritual; the positive (cataphatic) theology of knowledge of the attributes ascribed to God; and the negative (apophatic) theology that negates all attributes as inferior to the utterly unknowable divine nature itself. As the soul rises upward it comes to a realm of discourse beyond both affirmation and negation where it attains mystical union. Speaking of Moses the archetypal mystic in *Mystical Theology* 1.3, Dionysius says: 'Renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and invisible, he belongs completely to Him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the Wholly Unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing' (Luibheid 1987: 137, adapted).⁵ This state of 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) can also be called mystical union. In *Divine Names* 2.9, speaking of how his teacher Hierotheus 'not only learned, but experienced the divine things', Dionysius says: 'For he had a sympathy with such matters, if I may express it this way, and he was perfected in a mystical union (*mystikên henôsin*) with them and in a faith in them which was independent of any education' (Luibheid 1987: 65, adapted).⁶ Dionysius's teaching on union is a form of indistinction lying beyond all being and knowing.

Medieval Period

The main lines of all three models of union with God were laid down in the patristic period. The thousand years of the Middle Ages saw considerable development of these forms, so varied that only a few important figures can be treated here. In the early Middle Ages Johannes Scotus Eriugena, the ninth-century Irish scholar at the court of Charles the Bald, was an important contributor. John not only translated Dionysius into Latin, but also translated and was influenced by the works of the seventh-century Greek mystic, Maximus Confessor. Eriugena's term for uniting with God, taken over from Maximus, is *adunatio*, often *adunatio ineffabilis*, or 'ineffable unification' (McGinn 1994: 116–18). It does not refer primarily to what takes place in this life, but rather to the eschatological interpenetration of the divine and the human in the final stage of the return to God. Eriugena describes this differentiating unification as 'the simple unity

⁵ Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* 1.1 speaks of looking for the sight of 'mystical things' (*ta mystika*), and striving upward toward 'union (*henôsin*) with Him who is beyond all being and knowledge' (Luibheid 1987: 135).

⁶ Dionysius uses the term *henôsis* fifty-eight times, though not always about mystical union. For other passages that deal with mystical union, see *Divine Names* 1.1, 1.4, 1.5, 3.1, 4.11, and 11.2. The term is also found in the *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.2; the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2.1.1, 2.3.4, 3.3.3; and *Letter* 10.

consisting of a manifold unification of all creatures in their principles and causes, and of the principles and causes themselves in the Only Begotten Word of God' (John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* 5 (PL 122: 906B); O'Meara 1987: 577–8).

The major mystics of the twelfth century all contributed to the classic expression of the *unitas spiritus* model of understanding union. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) wrote eighty-six sermons commenting on the early chapters of the Song of Songs in which he provides numerous discussions of the union between the soul-bride and Jesus, the divine Bridegroom. Bernard's favourite image for union is the kiss (he devotes eight sermons to Song 1: 1, 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of the mouth'). As he says in Sermon 2.2: 'His living active Word is to me a kiss, not indeed an adhering of the lips that can sometimes belie a union of hearts, but an unreserved infusion of joys, a revealing of mysteries, a marvelous and indistinguishable mingling of the divine light with the enlightened mind, which, joined in truth to God, is one spirit with him' (Sermon 2.2; Walsh 1971: 9).⁷ Bernard's most famous treatment of mystical union comes in his treatise *On Loving God*, which lays out four stages by which the soul arises from love of the self for the self's sake to love of self only for God. Bernard describes the fourth stage as an ecstatic loss of self which few, if any, will arrive at in this life: 'To lose yourself, as if you no longer existed, to cease completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing, is not a human sentiment, but a divine way of life.' Later he claims, 'To be drawn in this way is to be deified' (*Sic affici, deificari est*), and he uses three metaphors for union that were to be often repeated—becoming one with God is like a drop of water dissolved in a vat of wine, like an iron heated in fire till it becomes enflamed, or like air transformed by sunshine. These images might suggest a union of indistinction, but Bernard is quick to insist that the human substance remains, although in another form (*On Loving God* 10.27–8 (29–30); Stiegman 1995: 29–30 adapted).

Building on Augustine's theology of the Trinity and our participation in it through the three powers of the soul (memory, understanding, and will), Bernard's friend, William of St Thierry (d. 1148), created a fully developed teaching on the Trinitarian nature of mystical union, as found in his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, and three treatises: *The Golden Letter*, *The Mirror of Faith*, and *The Enigma of Faith*. Like Bernard, William sees union as essentially *unitas spiritus*. In *The Golden Letter* he says: 'Beyond this [the life of virtue] there is still another likeness to God... It is so expressly characteristic that it is no longer called a likeness, but a unity of spirit. It happens when a person becomes one with God, one spirit not only in the unity of willing the same things, but by means of a more evident truth of virtue,... namely the inability to will anything else' (*The Golden Epistle*, n. 262; Déchanet 2004: 252–4, my tr.). William adds to Bernard in two ways. The first is in his analysis of the role of both love and knowledge in the transformation of union. Commenting on the soul-bride's 'eyes that are like doves' (Song 1: 14), he says the two eyes become one 'when in the contemplation of God, in which love is chiefly operative, reason passes over into love and is formed into a kind of spiritual or

⁷ This reference to 1 Cor. 6: 17 is one of the fifty-one times Bernard cites the verse. For other important texts on union, see Sermons 7.2, 8.9, 67.8, 71.6–10, 83.3, etc.

divine understanding which surpasses and absorbs all reason' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs* n. 88; Verdeyen 1997: 67, my tr.). William expresses this in the phrase (also found in Bernard), *amor ipse intelligentia est* ('Love itself is a kind of understanding'), or, in short form, as the *sensus/intellectus amoris*. William's second contribution is in his recasting *unitas spiritus* as fundamentally Trinitarian, that is, a coming to share in the life of the Trinity by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love between Father and Son. The *conjunctio* that unites the human person to God is 'Spirit-centered'. What is realized in the soul as the *similitudo Trinitatis* is 'the unity of the Father and the Son, their very kiss, the embrace, the love, the goodness and whatever is common to both of them in that supremely simple union. That is entirely the Holy Spirit, God, Charity, both Giver and Gift' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs* n. 41; Verdeyen 1997: 70, my tr.). In another place he says, 'When the human spirit has merited to be drawn to the Spirit, spirit to Spirit, love to Love, human love becomes divine in a way. Already in loving God a human person is the worker, but God is the working' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs* n. 96; Verdeyen 1997: 72–3, my tr.). In other words, the *unitas similitudinis* in which we become one with God is a participation in the *unitas consubstantialis* of the Trinity. For Bernard, *unitas spiritus* meant 'the unity of the Holy Spirit'; for William, *unitas spiritus* is the unity that *is* the Holy Spirit.

The twelfth-century canons of the house of St Victor at Paris also wrote about mystical union as a part of their programme to explore the nature and kinds of contemplation. Richard of St Victor's *Four Degrees of Violent Charity* express the common understanding of union as *unitas spiritus*, but by adapting the courtly language of the longing of love and even its sometime insanity, he gives union a new flavour that looks forward to the passionate forms of union found in the thirteenth-century beguine mystics. In Richard's four degrees it is the third level, 'singular love' (*amor singularis*), that represents the ecstasy of erotic union of the soul with the Divine Bridegroom. 'The soul', he says, 'thirsts to go into God, when through ecstasy of mind, she desires to pass totally into God' (Richard of St Victor, *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity* 28; Gervais Dumeige 1965: 155, my tr.). But this is not the end. Singular love is followed by 'insatiable love' (*amor insatiabilis*), which is the insane love that compels the soul to leave the delights of contemplative union to descend to the arena of active love for others.

Around 1200 a major shift is evident in Western mysticism, a shift that I have called the 'New Mysticism' (McGinn 1998: 1–69). The early medieval traditions of monastic mysticism did not die out, but new forms of religious life, especially the beguines and the mendicant orders, encouraged creative ways of writing about contact with God by a wider group of authors, including many women, mostly writing in the vernacular. These developments did not create new models of the understanding of mystical union, but they did lead to changes in the ways these models were understood. The *unitas spiritus* mode often took on a flavour of erotic passion of an intensity not found previously. Many mystics, following the lead of William of St Thierry, if not necessarily under his influence, explored Trinitarian modes of understanding union, that is, uniting with the three divine persons within the dynamism of God's inner life. Finally, forms of indistinct union in which the individual subject is absorbed into God so that there is no longer any distinction between the two emerged with new strength. These kinds of teachings were

daring and were often viewed with suspicion or met with condemnation by ecclesiastical authority. Again, two caveats are important to note. The first is that most authors who spoke of indistinct union allowed that this was the case on one level, but that from another perspective some form of distinction remained between God and the soul. The second point is that very often mystics mingled the language of the different forms of union, perhaps to indicate that the mystery of the divine-human conjunction was too mysterious to be expressed only in one way.

Among the variations on union as *unitas spiritus* was that pioneered by the last of the Victorines, Thomas Gallus (d. 1246). For Gallus mystical theology has two complementary textbooks, both of which he commented on extensively. The Song of Songs reveals the cataphatic dimension of the path to union, that is the erotic joining of the soul-bride with the Divine Bridegroom, while the Dionysian corpus gives the negative side of the ascent by means of the angelic hierarchies to pass into dark union with God (*unitio*) that takes place in the point of supreme affectivity (*apex affectus*) where all intellection is left behind (see Coolman 2017). Gallus's combination of the Song of Songs with Dionysius gave rise to a tradition of affective Dionysianism that was to strongly affect several strands of late medieval mysticism and views on mystical union. We find this in Bonaventure (d. 1274) and his *The Mind's Journey into God*, in the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c.1380), and in the mystical writings of Jean Gerson (d. 1429).

Three major beguine mystics of the thirteenth century present significant teachings about union. The Flemish beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp (c.1250), a skilled writer in both prose and poetry, spoke with intense passion about the relation of God and the soul in the game of *minne* that brings both delight and pain (Hart 1980). *Minne* for Hadewijch and other beguines is universal love—a force divine, cosmic, and human. There is a strong Trinitarian dimension to Hadewich's notion of uniting with divine *minne* (e.g. *Letters* 22 and 30), which may have been inspired by William of St Thierry. Her teaching about the soul and God as mutual abysses (*Letter* 18 and *Vision* 12) often implies a union of indistinction, and in *Vision* 7 she recounts an experience of erotic union with Jesus that concludes in a state, where, she says, 'it is as if we were one without distinction' (*wee een waren sonder differencie*) (Hadewijch, *Vision* 7.87–8; Willaert 1996: 82). In Hadewijch we see a realization of the indistinct unity that the pre-existent self has always enjoyed in the depths of the Trinity—a position not far from that of Eckhart and later mystics of indistinction. The German beguine, Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. c.1282) mixes various forms of union-language (Tobin 1998). She has explicit accounts of erotic uniting with God in her *Book of the Flowing Godhead* (e.g. 1.44), but she also uses language that suggests a deep indistinct uniting, even of a Trinitarian character, as when she speaks of the 'blessed person, who tries to do everything from the love of God as 'one whole person with the Holy Trinity', who becomes 'one God with God, in such a way that whatever He wills she wills as well, and they can be united in complete union no other way' (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 6.1; Tobin 1998: 226).⁸ Marguerite Porete, a French-speaking beguine executed as a heretic in 1310, carried indistinct union even further in

⁸ For other texts on the Trinitarian nature of union, see e.g. *Flowing Light*, 2.22, 3.9, 3.15, 4.8, 4.12, 6.32, and 6.39.

her *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Marguerite daringly claimed that the truly annihilated soul could attain a level (the sixth degree in her seven-stage ascent of love) where the soul would become so absorbed into God that it could no longer be said to exist, but that God would himself become the place where the formerly existent soul would continue to act, no longer as 'itself', but as now indistinguishable from God (*Mirror of Simple Souls* 118; Babinsky 1993: 189–94).

The resurgence of the model of indistinct union reached a culmination in Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1328), a learned Dominican master of theology, but also a popular preacher who seems to have been influenced by women mystics, such as Marguerite Porete and Mechthild. Eckhart's mysticism begins and ends in the indistinct union of the *grunt*, or ground, where 'God's ground is the soul's ground, and the soul's ground is God's ground'; or, in terms of ocular indistinction, 'The eye with which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me.'⁹ The *grunt* is essential indistinction, the ultimate source where all is one. In his Latin works Eckhart presents this identity through an analysis of God as *unum*, the supreme reality whose distinction (i.e. difference) from all other things is the fact that the *unum* as such is indistinct, that is, one with all.¹⁰ In his German sermons and treatises Eckhart uses bold language to present his message of indistinction. He sometimes employs the image of the empty desert. For example, in Sermon 48 he says the 'the spark of the soul' is not content with the Trinity of Persons, or even the divine essence, 'but it wants to know the source of this essence, it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit' (Sermon 48; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 198). Eckhart's teaching on union also has a deeply Trinitarian character, because he insists that the soul is one with the birth of the Son from the Father and the procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son. Thus, in Sermon 6, he says that because we are one with God in the ground, 'God's existence (*wesen*) must be my existence and God's self-identity (*istikeit*) is my self-identity', so that just as the Father is always giving birth to the Son, 'He gives me birth, me, his son and the same son' (Sermon 6; Colledge and McGinn 1981: 187). This kind of language caused Eckhart difficulties, and a number of articles drawn from his works, including this statement from Sermon 6, were condemned as heretical after his death. Nonetheless, Eckhart defended his strong statements of indistinct union, primarily by distinguishing two levels, or aspects, of human nature. On the one hand, insofar as humans are *imago Dei*, they are one and the same as the Son in the Trinity, the Father's perfect *imago*. On the other hand, humans always remain created beings made 'according to the image' (*ad imaginem*), and thus distinct from God.

Eckhart's indistinct union laid down a challenge for those who came after him. His Dominican followers, Henry Suso (d. 1366) and John Tauler (d. 1361), made use of many Eckhartian themes, including the language of indistinct union, but with caution. They

⁹ Two collections of translations of Eckhart's Latin and vernacular works are Colledge and McGinn (1981), and McGinn et al. (1986). Among the sermons that present these identity formulas are 5b, 12, and 15.

¹⁰ See especially the exposition on Wisdom 7: 27a, 'And because it [Wisdom] is one, it can do all things', in Eckhart, *Commentary on Wisdom*, nn. 144–57 (McGinn 1986: 166–71).

also stressed the ongoing ontological difference between God and creature (which Eckhart also admitted, at least on one level), and they made indistinction into a primarily mental category. In one place, for example, Suso says that in the case of some souls 'a powerful annihilating bursting into the Nothing removes all difference in the ground, not of essences, but on the part of our perception' (Henry Suso, *Little Book of Truth*; Tobin 1989: 320; also see McGinn 2005). An interesting reaction to Eckhartian indistinction is found in Jan van Ruusbroec (d. 1381), a Flemish priest and canon at the Augustinian house of Groenendaal near Brussels. Ruusbroec's vernacular treatises set out an impressive mystical teaching that uses many themes close to Eckhart, but that are also (implicitly) strongly critical of other aspects of the Dominican's teaching. This is evident in Ruusbroec's doctrine of mystical union that incorporates the *unitas spiritus* model, along with a union with the Trinity, and a union of indistinction. In his *Spiritual Espousals* and especially in his *Little Book of Enlightenment* Ruusbroec distinguishes three forms of concomitant union: (1) union with an intermediary, i.e. through grace, the Church and its sacraments; (2) union without an intermediary (i.e. a direct encounter with the Trinitarian God in the depths of the soul); and (3) 'union without difference or distinction ... where the three Persons give way to the essential unity and without distinction enjoy essential blessedness' (John Ruusbroec, *The Little Book of Clarification* III.B; Wiseman 1985: 265). This final form of 'superessential union' (*overweselijcke eeninge*) was controversial, being attacked by Jean Gerson and others. Through the later translations of Ruusbroec's works into Latin and its recasting in late medieval mystical handbooks, such as that of the Dutch Franciscan, Hendrik Herp (d. 1477), his views had considerable influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There were other mystics in the late Middle Ages who had important teachings on mystical union, such as Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) and Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510) in Italy, Walter Hilton (d. c.1390) and Julian of Norwich (d. c.1420) in England, and Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1461) in Germany. Enough has been said to indicate the richness of speculation on the nature of mystical union in the period between 1200 and 1500.

Early Modern Period

Between 1500 and 1700 there were a number of major religious developments in Europe that affected mysticism and the understanding of mystical union. The Reformation split Europe into warring religious camps. It has sometimes been said that the Reformers eschewed the mystical element of religion, but this was scarcely the case. There were a number of Protestant mystics who treated union with God, not only in the Lutheran tradition (e.g. Johann Arndt, d. 1621), but also among the Radical Reformers (e.g. Valentin Weigel, d. 1588), and in the English Reformation (e.g. the poet George Herbert, d. 1633) (McGinn 2016b). These mystics created variations on the three models of union handed on to them from tradition. Johann Arndt's view of union with Christ fed on medieval sources and was in the *unitas spiritus* tradition, while Valentin Weigel and some of the other Radicals were influenced by late-medieval

German mysticism and taught a form of inner indistinction from God that questions all the external trappings of religion.

Catholic mystical theology during the period from 1500 to 1700 was strongest in Spain and France, though there were also important mystics in Italy and Catholic Germany. Two factors are important for understanding mystical union and the debates about it at this time. The first was the ongoing suspicions of Church authorities concerning some forms of mysticism that seemed to imply liberation from outward ecclesiastical observances and to teach a form of merging into God without distinction. These fears led to the condemnations of the 'Enlightened Ones' (*Alumbrados*) in Spain, and eventually to the Quietist controversy that roiled Catholic Italy, Spain, and France in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. A second, and newer, development was the emergence of 'mysticism' (Fr.: *la mystique*) as a distinct category or type of science with its own vocabulary and rules of argument and presentation (de Certeau 1964). This academic observation of mysticism seems to have encouraged growing use of the term 'mystical union', although references to the phrase slightly antedate the early seventeenth-century creation of mysticism as a subject of academic study.¹¹

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were the Golden Age of Spanish mysticism (McGinn 2017). Despite the many repressive aspects of Spanish Catholicism, Spain's role as the most powerful Catholic realm of the era seems to have encouraged an explosion of mystical literature. The Observant Franciscan mystics of 'recollection' (*recogimiento*) of the first half of the century stand within the *unitas spiritus* tradition, emphasizing the role of what Bernardino da Laredo (d. 1540) called *amor unitivo*, the love that brings the soul into the quiet of contemplation. Francisco de Osuna (d. 1540) seems to have been one of the first to use the expression 'prayer of union' by which 'recollected people... remember God and give themselves so completely to him that they forget themselves as totally as if they did not exist' (Francisco de Osuna, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* 13.4; Giles 1981: 350). Union language does not play a large role in the writings of Ignatius Loyola (d. 1556). Where mystical union comes up for significant treatment is in the writings of the two great Discalced Carmelite mystics, Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and her disciple John of the Cross (d. 1591).

Teresa was a profound analyst of interior mystical states throughout her writings. There are important shifts from her early *Life* (1562–5) and her mystical masterpiece, *The Interior Castle* (1577), primarily with regard to the relation of action and contemplation. While Teresa's accounts of union, especially in the final three dwelling places of *The Interior Castle*, are among the most memorable in mystical literature, they fit fundamentally into the model of the erotic understanding of becoming one spirit with God through spiritual betrothal and mystical marriage. Teresa has three levels of uniting with God in *The Interior Castle*. In Mansion 5 she deals with the prayer of union and the

¹¹ John Calvin (d. 1564) actually uses the phrase *unio mystica* several times (e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.10), but only as referring to the union of Christ the head and his members. The first to use the term extensively in a mystical sense is Calvin's contemporary, the Benedictine abbot Louis de Blois (d. 1566), who uses the expression nine times in his *Spiritual Institution*, first published in 1553.

stilling of the faculties (Union I), distinguishing between two types, the permanent union of resignation to the divine will (*unión verdadera*) and the temporary delightful union (*unión regalada*) of the reception of spiritual gifts. Mansion 6 deals with Union II, the account of the soul's spiritual betrothal to Christ and the types of ecstasy. Finally, Mansion 7 describes the highest level of Union III, the grace of spiritual marriage, a permanent and connatural uniting of God and the soul in its centre, a stage that is beyond rapture.

In his poems and four mystical treatises John of the Cross constructs a masterful synthesis of all three models of mystical union. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5 he describes the forms of union as permanent and transitory; in the soul's substance or in the faculties; and as habitual and actual. He does not discuss the substantial union by which God always is present giving being to the soul, but concentrates on the forms of the supernatural union of likeness (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 162–6).¹² If the basic model of union John employs is an erotic one of the love between the soul-bride and God in what Teresa and he called 'the center of the soul' (*centro del alma*), the growing love union also involves a uniting with the three Persons of the Trinity, and he sometimes uses language that suggests indistinction. For example, in speaking of the habit of union in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.2.8, John says: 'As a result all the operations of the memory and other faculties in this state are divine... [T]he operations are not different from those of God... Since the one who is united to God is one spirit with him, as Paul says, the operations of the soul united with God are of the divine Spirit and are divine' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.2.8; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 270).

In his final treatise, *The Living Flame of Love*, a presentation of the spiritual marriage, John uses the three Augustinian powers of the soul (memory, understanding, will) to show how the soul comes into union with the three Persons of the Trinity. The second stanza of the poem that he is commenting upon contained a passionate outburst: 'O sweet cautery, / O delightful wound, / O gentle hand! O delicate touch...' John comments: 'Thus the hand, the cautery, and the touch are in substance the same. The soul applies these terms to the Persons of the Trinity because of the effect each Person produces...' The wound, or cautery, is applied to the Holy Spirit, while the delicate touch is the Son. 'The third is transformation, a gift by which all debts are paid. This is attributed to the Father, and hence calls him a gentle hand' (*Living Flame* 2.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 658). The rest of the treatise is a subtle exploration of the Trinitarian dimension of mystical union, sometimes using indistinction language. Like Suso, Tauler, and Ruusbroec, however, John holds that indistinction is a matter of perception. As he put it in his *The Spiritual Canticle*, 'The thread of love binds the two [the soul and God]... with such firmness and so unites and transforms them and makes them one

¹² *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5 is essential to John's notion of union. For other important texts on union, see *Ascent* 3.2.5–9; *Dark Night* 2.2.5, 2.9.4, 2.13.11, 2.21.12, and 2.23.13–14; *Spiritual Canticle* 12.6–8, 14/15.28–30, 22.3–7, 24.2–9, 26.4–11, 27.6, 29.2, 31.2 and 10, 35.4–6, 36.1, 40.1; and *Living Flame* 1.3–4, 16–17, 29; 2.32–4; 3.24–6; 4.2 and 14–16.

in love, that, although they differ in substance, yet in glory and appearance the soul seems to be God and God the soul' (*Spiritual Canticle* 12.7; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 517–18).

The French mystics of the seventeenth century represent the final florescence of mysticism before the condemnation of Quietism at the end of the century produced a lamentable caesura in the history of mysticism, at least in Western Europe. There were a host of mystics in France at this time, both men and women. The most important of the mystics writing in French was Francis de Sales (d. 1622), whose *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616) is a graceful *summa* of the mystical tradition. Francis takes up mystical union in book 7, treating 'The Union of the Soul with God that is Perfected in Prayer.' Recasting Teresian materials, Francis deals with five forms of union with God, both operative, where God alone acts, and cooperative, where we have something to do. Chapter 3 of book 7 turns to the highest stage of union, that is, 'union by suspension or ravishment', or 'what the theologians call inhesion or adhesion.' The following chapters (7.4–6) distinguish three kinds: rapture of the intellect; rapture of the will; and rapture of act and life. What is most significant about Francis's presentation is that he says that the rapture of act and life that is the highest form of union is actually non-ecstatic, consisting in the life of Christian virtue. 'This', he says, 'is not to live in ourselves, but out of and above ourselves, and because no one is able to go out of himself in this manner above himself unless the eternal Father draw him, hence it is that this kind of life is a perpetual rapture and a continuing ecstasy of action and operation' (*Treatise on the Love of God* 7.6; Mackey 1953: 299). In this view of union, Francis, somewhat like Richard of St Victor and Teresa, has redefined contemplative union as active love.

Francis's contemporary Pierre de Bérulle (d. 1629) was politically involved and highly influential on the course of seventeenth-century French mysticism. Bérulle and his followers, such as John Eudes and Jean-Jacques Olier, had much to say about mystical union, often under the influence of aspects of the late medieval view of union, with their language of indistinction, as well as the long tradition of *unitas spiritus* with its marital forms of expression. Bérulle's mysticism is grounded on the need to identify with Jesus in the various states of his life, an identification that produces an unmediated relational unity. His view of our unity in the one mystical Person of the Word made flesh is a product of the intense love between Christ and the believer that goes back to Origen's reading of the Song of Songs: 'Love transports us out of ourselves into him, and, what is more, it makes us like him as he is in himself, by divinizing and transforming us into God' (Bérulle, *Discourse on the State and Grandeurs of Jesus* 9.1; Glendon 1989: 148).

The many female mystics of seventeenth-century France, such as the Ursuline nun Marie de l'Incarnation (d. 1672), have much to say about their experiences of union. Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most controversial, was the Quietist lay mystic, Madame Jeanne Guyon (d. 1717). The three-volume *Life* that Guyon began writing in 1682 tells the story of her path to union through the reception of both mystical gifts and interior sufferings (*Life* 1.21, 23–7). Her trials ended due to the gift of what she calls 'God-Peace' (*la paix Dieu*), which, like Marguerite Porete, involved a state of annihilation of the self in which God took over her will. 'My soul found that another will had taken

the place of its own, an entirely divine will, which, however, was so suited to it and natural that it found itself infinitely more free in this will than it had been in its own.' The soul has surrendered its own place and passed into God in what she calls a 'Union of unity' (*O Union d'unité*), citing John 17: 23, the biblical proof text for indistinct union (Madame Guyon, *Life* 1.28.8–10; Guenin-Lelle and Mourad 2012: 225–6). This is a permanent loss of self that goes beyond ecstasy, and Guyon has a number of descriptions of a deep union where the soul becomes identical with God in books 2 and 3 of the *Life*.¹³ Guyon's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* written about 1685, which might be described as a commentary-treatise on mystical union, is based on the distinction between union in the powers of the soul, or spiritual betrothal, and the essential union, or kiss of spiritual marriage, that takes place in the soul's essence. Both forms, according to Guyon, can be either temporary or permanent (Madame Guyon, *Commentary on the Song of Songs of Solomon*; Guenin-Lelle and Mourad 2012: 99–180).¹⁴

CONCLUSION

It may seem like extraordinary hubris that a weak and fallible human aspires to union with the Creator, the Trinity beyond all conception and human imagining. Nevertheless, the Christian mystical tradition has always insisted that union with God, that is, a hidden, or mystical union, is the goal of the Christian life, something that can be proleptically enjoyed in this life by the gift of grace, and that can only be fully realized in the life to come. Different modes of conceiving of this mystical union have flourished over almost two millennia. This chapter has tried to trace the evolution, as well as something of the interaction, of the three main historical modes.

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Dupuy (1992); Haas (2004); McGinn (2016, 1991–).

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¹³ For some passages on a deep union of indistinction, see *Life* 2.2.1, 2.4.1–8, 2.7.5–10, 2.8.1–3, 2.13.5–10, 2.22.8, and 3.13.6–10.

¹⁴ Union in the powers has a Trinitarian character, with union with the Father taking place in the memory, union with the Son in the intellect, and union with the Holy Spirit in the will.

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PART IV

MYSTICISM AND
THEOLOGY

CHAPTER 22

METAPHYSICS, THEOLOGY, AND THE MYSTICAL

DAVID TRACY

INTRODUCTION

ONE way of showing the close relations among metaphysics, theology, and mysticism is to focus on the concept of the infinite present in all three forms of thinking and ways of life. As an example of those relationships this chapter will concentrate on three periods: first, the third and fourth centuries (Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa); second, more briefly, the medieval God as infinite (Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus); and third, the new i.e. modern beginning of the infinite in philosophy, theology, and mysticism in seventeenth-century France in René Descartes on the philosophical idea of the infinite and François Fénelon on a mystical theology of the Infinite as pure love. One could reasonably concentrate on other periods and persons: e.g. John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa, and Giordano Bruno; Friedrich Schleiermacher (for whom religion is 'a sense and taste of the Infinite') and Georg Wilhelm Hegel (on the 'good' and 'bad' Infinite); on post-Cantor new mathematical understandings of infinities and their possible philosophical implications for rethinking the idea of God (Cantor himself) and a mystical theology of the Infinite as inspired by contemporary mathematics in the Russian Orthodox mathematician, physicist, and theologian Pavel Florensky.

The infinite is not a univocal concept. Among the many different meanings of the concept, the most basic division is that between the quantitative infinite in mathematics, physics, and cosmology and the ontological infinite as first principle, ultimate reality, source of all reality in philosophy and theology (For histories and definitions of the 'infinite' in different disciplines, see Moore 1990; Clegg 2003; Major 1991; Barrow 2005; Sweeney 1992; Hart 2003; Harries 2002; Heller and Woodin 2011.)

In its diverse, sometimes conflictual meanings, the concept of the infinite has been an indispensable category: first, as a quantitative category for number in mathematics and space-time extensions in cosmology and physics; more recently, for the multiple mathematical infinities of contemporary post-Cantor mathematics. Third, and the focus of this chapter, the infinite is a vital ontological category as the ultimate actual infinite in philosophy (Plotinus, Eriugena, Cusa, Scotus, Descartes, Schleiermacher, Levinas, among others) and in theology (Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite, Maximus Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Nicholas of Cusa, François Fénelon, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Rahner, and others). In my judgement, Duns Scotus was entirely correct: the infinite is the first reality, though not the last (that is infinite Trinitarian Love) to affirm about the Christian God. The actual infinite names the first principle, the ultimate reality as source and end of all reality: the Good beyond Being, the One, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, *Ipsum Intelligere*. Unlike an alternative category for the ultimate, the absolute, the category infinite does not close into an encompassing totality (Levinas 1969) but is always infinitely open as well as internally related to all other reality—which the Absolute by definition is not.

THE CLASSICAL GREEK BELIEF ON THE INFINITE AS IMPERFECTION

The classical Greek commitment to the form-principle (see Plato 1930: VI–X) as necessary for all intelligibility prevented Plato from developing his profoundly original articulation of ultimate reality, a necessarily perfect reality as the Good beyond Being (Plato 1930: VII 517b–518d), into a notion of the Infinite Good beyond Being as the perfect Infinite One. Plato, despite his insistence on the Good beyond Being as the highest reality, does not hold the Good as actually infinite. Aristotle developed his influential notion of the qualitative infinite (*apeiron*, sometimes *aoriston*) in *Physics* 202b30–208a27; the First Unmoved Mover, the Separate Intelligence (*Nous*) is not actually infinite *in se* but only through the power of its effects (*Metaphysics* 1073a 6–10; see also *Physics*, tr. Jonathan Barnes 1984: i. 315–447; *Metaphysics* 1984: ii. 1552–1729).

For Plato as for most classical Greeks (Anaximander is an exception), the ultimate must possess a definite, bounded form in order to be perfect. The ultimate cannot be formless, which is by definition imperfect and unintelligible. The infinite, for Plato and for almost all classical Greek understandings of perfection, was formless. Any reality that was formless was chaotic, *unintelligible*, *imperfect*. Despite his radical critique of Plato's theory of the Forms, Aristotle also upheld the form-principle as one key to intelligibility (i.e. now as the principle of intelligibility of all reality as composed of act and potency, form and matter). Aristotle united form to potentially limitless 'prime matter' in order to formulate the basic Aristotelian principle of finite form/matter. For Aristotle, form is not a separate reality, but form provides intelligibility which matter receives.

In Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic versions, the form-principle (as the necessary ontological key to all intelligibility) was central in most Western thought from Plato to Hegel and beyond (see Dupré 1993: 15–42).

..... PLOTINUS ON THE INFINITE AS PERFECT

Plotinus considered himself as merely a faithful interpreter of Plato. He certainly did not consider himself, as later scholarly ages named him, the first and most original Neoplatonist philosopher. On the topic of infinity Plotinus implicitly held what Plato and Aristotle explicitly denied: ultimate reality is actually infinite (see Plotinus 1.8.2.4–5; 2.4.15.17–20; 2.9.1.9; 5.4.1.12–13; 5.5.6.5; and 6.7.32.9–10). Plotinus explicated what Plato had left unconceptualized: namely, the fuller ontological meaning of ‘The Good beyond Being’ of the *Republic* as bearing an intrinsic metaphysical relationship to the ‘One’ of the *Parmenides* and the ‘Other and the Same’ of the *Sophist*.

Plotinus is a philosopher with a vision of the One/Good that is based on an intellectual intuition that is also correctly described as mystical. Indeed, Plato himself, as argued by A. J. Festugière in *Contemplation et Vie Contemplative*, is also correctly described as mystical.

Plotinian mystical metaphysics of the One/Good, the ultimate reality and first principle, is a henology not an ontology: the One beyond Being (ontology) as the ultimate dynamic living Real is also the Good, which as ultimate source radiates both Being (ontology) and Intelligence (epistemology) to ever lower levels in the Plotinian hierarchy of reality. The Infinite One as identically the Infinite Good is the ultimate impersonal source and end of all reality but the One as impersonal neither consciously chooses nor lovingly cares for us. Rather, the Infinite One precisely as the impersonal Good unconsciously overflows its plenitude to radiate all reality: from *Nous* (Pure Intelligence) to *Psyche* (soul) to cosmos to matter. For Plotinus, matter is at the very bottom of the Plotinian hierarchy of the real because it lacks form and is therefore interpreted as the negative infinity constituting the exact opposite to the fully positive infinity at the top of the hierarchy, the One/Good.

In summary, Plotinus insisted that the fundamental reality—or, perhaps more accurately, the fundamental, ineffable principle and source of all reality—is beyond Being (and, therefore, beyond ontology). The impersonal ultimate reality (on a few metaphorical occasions, the personal divine ‘He’) is One. However, even the One is finally only a name for Plotinus, a necessary but still inadequate name for the ineffable, dynamic, living first principle, the ultimate source and *telos* of all reality. For Plotinus, the Infinite One-Good is indeed not an adequate name but the One is the least inadequate name for the ultimate reality, rather like the name which is paradoxically a non-name, *tao* in taoism. The One-Good names what cannot ultimately be named (it is both ineffable and apophatic). The infinite incomprehensible One is the infinite source of the finite many (now arranged hierarchically from One to *nous*, to *psyche*, to cosmos, to matter) thus

finally resolving, in Plotinus's judgement, the most ancient of all Greek philosophical questions: the metaphysical relationship of the one and the many. The One, therefore, is the least inadequate name for the ultimately unnameable first principle: the One which radiates the many. For Plotinus, all being is constituted as many finite beings by the power of the Infinite One. The One as infinite is therefore formless, being-less, intelligence-less, boundless, in-finite. The One is the positive actual infinity denied as possible by Aristotle: the One positively unlimited and indeterminate, in-effable. It cannot therefore be defined save apophatically, i.e. as in-finite, in-determinate, in-effable. But the One is identically the Good which radiates all reality impersonally but generously, although unconsciously and uncaringly unlike the caring, intelligent, merciful, just, biblical God who is love. The living One as Good overflows, radiates, emanates the whole of all reality. For Plotinus as for the Jews and Christians, all reality is good (created reality for Jews, Christians, Muslims; emanated reality for Plotinus). Paradoxically, even matter once transformed into the beautiful form of the finite cosmos can also become good. Indeed, for Plotinus—here explicitly against contemporary Gnostics and implicitly in agreement with the Bible's affirmation of the goodness of all finite reality—all reality from *Nous* to soul to the beauty of the formed material cosmos is good. It is noteworthy that the usually serene Plotinus was uncharacteristically polemical towards the Gnostic disparagement of physical reality (*Enneads* 2.9).

For Plotinus the supreme philosophical and mystical principle of the One as the Good is implicitly infinite, for it is beyond form, beyond being, beyond intelligence, beyond care although impersonally generous to all emanated reality. The One as Good is not loving but is generous in its ceaseless overflowing unlike the indifferent ultimate realities (the gods) of Epicurus and even Aristotle. For Plotinus, actual positive infinity, therefore, is no longer an imperfection as it was for both Plato and Aristotle and almost all classical Greeks. The infinite One-Good is perfection itself.

Plotinus's purely spiritual One is not the fated material Logos in the eternally recurring fiery cosmos of the Stoics and later of Nietzsche with his doctrine of eternal return and his Stoic-like call to *amor fati*. Nor is the infinite One-Good the finite Unmoved Mover of Pure Intelligence (*Nous*) of Aristotle, nor even the finite (because formed) highest Good, the Good beyond Being of Plato (which is either the Good as the Form of all forms or the formless Infinite Good—the text, *Republic* 509b, can be read either way). Plotinus's intellectual revolution is clear: he is the first major philosopher to develop the idea of an actual infinite (not as in Aristotle, merely a potential infinite with infinite effects). To be sure, two centuries earlier, Philo, both philosophically and theologically, named God the infinite but did not elaborate his brilliant and original insight into the metaphysical-mystical complex systematic form of Plotinus. The effects of this Plotinian revolution have reverberated through centuries of much Western thought: pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic. Plotinus has also influenced a good deal of early modern and classically modern thought through the profound effect of Neoplatonism on all Western thought: in the modern period, all forms of absolute idealism as well as Romantic thought (for example, the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson with his notion of 'the Vast').

GREGORY OF NYSSA: THE INFINITE LOVING GOD AND INFINITE HUMAN DESIRE (EPEKTASIS)

What Plotinus was to philosophy, Gregory of Nyssa was to Christian theology: the first mystical theologian and dialectical and contemplative philosopher to develop with its full complexity the theological implications of his philosophical and mystical insight: God is infinite; as infinite, God is incomprehensible. Clement of Alexandria had earlier named God infinite but had not worked out in detail that ground-breaking insight either philosophically or theologically as Gregory, a century later, did.

Gregory's works of his later, more explicitly mystical years, *The Life of Moses* and *The Commentary on the Song of Songs*, were written more than ten years after his earlier dialectical-argumentative and surprisingly polemical texts, *Contra Eunomius* I and II. In *The Life of Moses* (see Gregory 1978: 2.219–365, esp. 233 and 236) and other texts, especially his last text, *A Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory turns his attention away from earlier dialectical debates with Eunomius on neo-Arianism to work out the fuller implications for the Christian way of life and the metaphysical and mystical thought of a God who, as infinite, is necessarily incomprehensible, not the reverse (see Mühlenberg 1966; Kannengiesser 1967: 55–64; Hart 2003:190–204). Gregory's philosophical and theological oeuvre demonstrates well the error of three Western dualistic oppositions: first, an opposition between philosophy as theory and philosophy as a way of life (see Hadot 1995); second, an even more fatal binary opposition between contemplation and action (which, for Gregory, can never be separated); third, a related modern often unconscious binary opposition between theology and spirituality all too frequently taken for granted in much modern theology and much modern spirituality, with the fatal result that theology can seem spiritually dry while spirituality can seem intellectually weak.

In his early dialectical work, *Against Eunomius* (see Gregory 1960: 1.156–83; cf. Wiles 1989), Gregory forged rigorous dialectical and rhetorical arguments defending the doctrines of Nicaea and anticipating First Constantinople. Nevertheless, these early works, however different in genre and tone, are not different in content from his contemplative and mystical later texts, *Life of Moses* (see Gregory 1978: 2.219–35; Daniélou 1954: 259–62; Ludlow 2007) and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Few thinkers have been so at home as Gregory of Nyssa in the full range of classical reason—from discursive dialectical argument and rhetorical persuasion to constructive speculation and finally to mystical contemplation. As a result, the idea of the infinite was a Gregorian constant, both in his philosophy and his mystical theology.

Gregory intrinsically correlated a predication of God as infinite, a proposition forged in his debates with Eunomius, with a novel understanding of our infinite, loving desire as never-ending, i.e. as infinite desire stretching out (*epektasis*) to God (see Gregory

1978: 111–20; Williams 1990: 61; Danielou 1944 and 1997: 56–71). This metaphysical and mystical spiritual transformation of all our desires and virtues by our excessive desire of love (*epektasis*) happens, for Gregory, when the finite self or soul experiences the divine infinite desire that frees the soul for loving contemplation of the infinite God united to infinite loving action toward any other as other, i.e. the neighbour, the near-one. Gregory's position on a metaphysics of infinite desire is surprisingly akin to Emmanuel Levinas's although the primary other in each case is reversed: for Gregory, our love of God as the Other of infinite love empowers us to love the other, every neighbour. For Levinas, our ethical-metaphysical attention to the infinite otherness of every other human being (i.e. the neighbour) empowers the idea of God, the absolutely 'Other Other', to 'come to mind'. The truly free and graced self, for Gregory, experiences an infinite stretching out (*epektasis*) toward the infinite God. As infinite, God for Gregory, like the One-Good for Plotinus, is necessarily incomprehensible. For Gregory, God is the infinitely intelligent and loving God (not the Plotinian impersonal One-Good) now understood as a Trinitarian monotheism of the infinitely loving One (*ousia*) constituted by real relations (*pros-opa*—*hypostasis*).

Gregory's innovation on our infinite desire empowered by the grace of the infinitely loving God was based on his interpretation of a metaphor rather casually used by St Paul in Philippians 3: 14–15: 'reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal'. Paul's verbal form, 'to reach [or stretch] out', became in Gregory the nominal form *epektasis*, stretching out. *Epektasis* was, for Gregory, the exactly correct word for our infinite, never-ending, intellectual and erotic 'stretching out' to God in this life and, against a good deal of Christian traditions, even after this life. *Epektasis*, for the etymologically fascinated Gregory, points both to *epi* ('at' or 'towards' the infinite incomprehensible God) while at the same time pointing to *ek*: i.e. the self 'outside' itself in the *epektasis-ecstasis* of the infinite, desiring, loving self.

Moreover, Gregory's dialectical arguments with Eunomius of Cyzicus were a crucial moment in theological history both for the continuing complex debate of how to name God as the biblical one infinite God and, in Christian theology, for understanding what was at stake for a Christian theological understanding of God as triune infinity in the fourth-century Trinitarian debates for naming God in fully Christian terms. The fourth-century inner-Christian debate on naming God was many-sided (see Chadwick 2001). Eunomius's fundamental doctrine was that through discursive dialectical reason reflecting on divine revelation we can define the essence of God if we correctly name God as *agennotos*, i.e. ungenerated (see Karfikova et al. 2007: 12–66, esp. 12–44). If that propositional definition of God as God holds, it follows logically, Eunomius argued, that any authentic Christian understanding of God would name only the *ungenerated* Father as God. In Eunomius's argument, the Son and Spirit are, after all, described even by anti-Arian orthodox Christians as generated by the ungenerated Godhead of the Father. Therefore, for Eunomius as for Arius before him, neither Son nor Spirit is divine; Son and Spirit are, as Arius earlier insisted, the highest most divine-like creatures but not God. Both Son and Spirit are generated not ungenerated; the Father alone is ungenerated and, therefore, it follows logically, Eunomius argued, the Father alone is God.

In a way, the Eunomian controversy proved for Gregory a *felix culpa* forcing him to clarify the name of God in his own emerging philosophical theology. In Gregory's judgement, Eunomius's principal error was his assumption that our finite minds can ever know the infinite essence of God. For Gregory, God is positively, actually infinite and, precisely as such, incomprehensible. Like so much of the Christian tradition influenced by the still underappreciated Jewish thinker Philo of first-century CE Alexandria three centuries before him, Gregory insisted that our finite minds can, in Philo's words, know *that* God is but not *what* God is (see Chadwick 1967: 135–57; Wolfson 1947). Contrary to some contemporary discussions of apophatic theology, Gregory did not hold that God is infinite because incomprehensible; rather God is incomprehensible because infinite. Along with Gregory's own dialectical arguments with Eunomius of Cyzicus, Gregory of Nyssa held that, if God is infinite, then the Christian God, by definition, must be incomprehensible to our finite minds as well as positively infinite, i.e. excessively intelligent and excessively loving. Eunomius's problem for Gregory was not just his particular definition of God as ungenerated but Eunomius' belief that the essence of God can be defined at all.

Moreover, Gregory, as a biblical and mystical theologian in his later contemplative work, held that the all-wise, all-mighty, all-loving God of the Bible (see especially Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*) has freed and purified the soul through pure gift (i.e. grace) into an experience of infinite desire (eros and/or agape) of humankind for God, the Infinite Beloved who is Love. In Gregory's theology, by the graced power of divine infinity (*Life of Moses*), God has shattered the limits, measures, and boundaries of created finite humankind. Henceforward, for Gregory, Christians can live a new Christian spiritual life of authentic freedom (the chief attribute of the human as *imago dei* for Gregory) as a life both contemplative and active: a life of infinite *epektasis* in this life and in the afterlife, a life that moves out of oneself (*extasis*) toward (*epi*) an ever greater loving desire for God and love of neighbour.

PLATONISM AND THE INFINITE- INCOMPREHENSIBLE GOD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A history of different understandings of the infinite is one of the defining characteristics of much Western thought and a good deal of Indian philosophy both Hindu and Buddhist as well as in Chinese taoism and Japanese and Chinese Buddhism. There are several fine single-volume histories of the infinite but in fact it would take several encyclopaedic volumes to do justice to the different, indeed often conflicting, meanings of the infinite held by the different Western thinkers for whom the category was prominent. Consider, for example, the important differences on the infinite between Spinoza and Hegel, or among Hegel, Schelling, and Schleiermacher.

The history of the infinite has been made all the more complex by the frequent intertwinings, and, at times, confusions, between quantitative infinities of number, time, and space and the metaphysical actual infinite. For example, Giordano Bruno in the sixteenth century was probably the first philosopher to call the universe infinite and then call God identical to the universe (i.e. pantheism or perhaps panentheism) (see Greenberg 1950). Bruno's position is in contrast to the earlier fifteenth-century viewpoint of Nicholas of Cusa whose mathematical genius united to his metaphysical and theological expertise and his Dionysian mysticism allowed him brilliantly to name God alone infinite; the universe is not infinite but indefinite, i.e. immense but finite. Since relativity theory and quantum physics the majority of contemporary physicists hold that the ever-expanding unimaginably extensive universe may be infinite but that we can know the universe (as in Cusa and Descartes and against Bruno) only as indefinite, not technically infinite. For Cusanus and Descartes only God is infinite (and therefore incomprehensible).

The surest way to avoid confusion in the exceptionally complex intellectual history of the idea of the infinite is at all times to remain attentive to Aristotle's distinction between, on the one hand, the quantitative infinities in number, space, and time and, on the other hand, the metaphysical and theological actual infinite called by many names (the One, the Good, etc.), but most accurately named God. The Aristotelian distinction still holds today even though Aristotle's own understandings of the content of both the quantitative infinite and the actual infinite have been largely replaced since the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, but not the distinction itself. Indeed, in the case of the quantitative infinite, Aristotle's meaning has been challenged in modernity in a twofold way. First, since Georg Cantor's invention of set theory in the nineteenth century, modern mathematics has developed plural mathematical infinities as well as Cantor's own mathematical notion of an 'Infinity of infinities'. Second, since the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, as Alexandre Koyré brilliantly argued in *Du monde clos à l'univers infini* (1957), the hierarchical, closed cosmology of the ancients (e.g. Aristotle) and the medievals (e.g. Thomas Aquinas) is no more. At the same time, Koyré's description of the new cosmology of a literally infinite universe, as in Giordano Bruno and most scientists before relativity theory, is no longer held by a majority of contemporary physicists and cosmologists after the dismantling of the idea of an infinite universe by the discoveries of relativity theory, quantum physics, and chaos theory (see Bréhier 1958: 106–32). The ever-expanding but not actually infinite universe is more accurately described by most physicists and cosmologists, as it was earlier by Descartes, as indefinite not infinite. Technically, for Descartes as for Cusanus before him, only God is actually infinite. Furthermore, any proper metaphysics of the infinite can ultimately be interpreted through the radically new insight, at once prophetic and mystical, provided by Christian faith in the revelation of God as love, theologically and doctrinally articulated as the infinite Trinitarian God of infinite being, infinite intelligence and, above all, infinite love.

In ancient philosophies, the idea of an actual metaphysical infinite—beyond the quantitative potentially infinite in time, space, and number, and the potentially infinite effects of Aristotle's non-infinite Unmoved Mover—had been denied not only by Plato

and Aristotle but by Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics alike. However, the actual infinite as the ultimate reality of generous, giving plenitude—i.e. explicitly in the One-Good of Plotinus, implicitly (in my judgement) in the Good beyond Being of Plato, explicitly in the triune infinite God of the Cappadocians—was defended by most Platonists whether pagan (from Plotinus to Proclus) or Christian (Clement of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena, and others). The most important exception to naming God infinite among Platonist Christian thinkers was Origen, who rejected the idea of the infinite for naming God largely because of Origen's singular, indeed rather strange middle Platonist account of creation and the fall as necessarily implying a finite God.

As we saw earlier, Plotinus was the first major philosopher metaphysically to hold that the One-Good can also be correctly named the infinite beyond (*telos*), beneath (sustainer), and before (source) all beings. This metaphysical Plotinian doctrine can also justly be named contemplatively mystical: i.e. as infinite the One-Good is the very source of all reality through its descending radiance or emanations. The infinite One-Good is also the final end of all reality. In consequence the ascent of the soul, in its ascending return to the One, is directly parallel to the major steps of its descent from the One to intelligence to soul to cosmos and to matter. In its ascent the soul moves from matter (a negative infinity) to cosmos to soul (*psyche*) to intelligence (*Nous*) to the One (the ultimate, the positive infinity). For this ascent the self first employs its own self-power drawn forward in magnet-style by the One-Good by means of self-purifying ascetical and intellectual exercises—including Plotinus's rigorous dialectical arguments—and, at the summit of the ascent in the *Nous*, Plotinus's more serene contemplative reason. At the same time, in this journey of return to the One, its true 'homeland', the soul is empowered not only by its own ascetical and intellectual self-purification (its self-power) but by the magnet-like all-powerful attraction of Other-Power itself, namely, the finally irresistible power of the infinite One-Good to guide the soul home. Indeed, at the final moment of the soul's journey in the *Nous*, the now contemplative self-power of the soul is helpless on its own and must await the One-Good taking the soul to itself for a mystical transient glimpse of the One.

Plotinus's impressive combination of self-power and Other-Power drives the soul's desire, in the beginning as the needful desire of lack. However, as the self gradually ascends in an ever more ascetically and intellectually purified state, the soul is more and more empowered by the generous overflow of the impersonal One-Good: at that point the soul experiences desire not as lack but as generous self-giving desire (*eros*). Plotinus reformulated in explicitly metaphysical and mystical terms Plato's famous distinction in the *Symposium* between desire as lack and desire as generous self-giving. In the *Symposium* (189d–193d, 203b, 205a–266a), *Eros* is the son of *Póros* ('the one who abounds') and *Penia* (poverty, lack). In Plotinus, the higher the soul ascends, the more its desire shifts from need to positive abounding overflow. At the summit of the soul's own efforts, as well as the power of the Good drawing the soul forward and upward, the soul ultimately arrives at the realm of intelligence-in-act (*Nous*). Within that realm of pure intelligence-in-act, the now contemplative soul can finally rest and wait passively

for the possibility that the One in its non-loving but generous impersonal magnet-like power of attraction may lift the soul up to a momentary, profoundly transformative vision of itself—the infinite One-Good, the ultimate reality, which is occasionally called God by Plotinus.

Christian theologians often employed Neoplatonist philosophy extensively, although never exclusively: Aristotle's logic as well as Stoic logic and ethics likewise played important roles in early Christian theology (for example, for both the Neoplatonist Gregory and the Neoplatonist Augustine). However, Platonism clearly played the major metaphysical role in early Christian theological understandings of the metaphysical infinite and a mystical sense of an awareness of the presence of God.

The early Christian theologians, of course, employed Platonism as a philosophical aid to their strictly theological concerns only after correcting and, at times, rejecting some of Platonism's principal philosophical-theological features: for example, most Christian Platonists rejected Plotinian emanation in favour of biblical creation *ex nihilo* with important intellectual consequences.

Above all, as Augustine so lucidly and lyrically wrote in the *Confessions*, Christian Platonist thinkers embraced the Platonist affirmation of God as a purely spiritual ultimate reality against Epicurean and Stoic materialism (the latter had influenced Tertullian's more materialistic concept of God). Above all, early Christian thinkers were faithful readers of the biblical portraits of God's infinite mercy, justice, and love and they found Platonism the most harmonious of ancient philosophies to employ as an aid for clarifying concepts in Christian theology. Christian theologians were philosophically Platonists until many medieval scholastics embraced Aristotle and his denial of the existence of the actual infinite and, therefore, hesitated to consider infinity a divine attribute. Aristotle's ultimate reality, the Unmoved Mover, was infinite in its effects but was not in itself the actual infinite. In Plotinus's judgement, Aristotle metaphysically reached the *Nous*, i.e. the realm of pure intelligence-in-act, but Aristotle could reach no further. For Plotinus, Aristotle, unlike Plato, never reached the infinite ultimate reality of the One-Good beyond both being and intelligence.

The biblical portrait of God therefore affirms, for the early Christians as for contemporary theologians, the person-like attributes of an individuality possessing infinite intelligence and infinite love (see Norris 2012: pp. xiii–xliv; Laird 2004). Therefore the early theologians could not accept Plotinus's impersonal, non-thinking, non-caring One-Good as at all equivalent to the biblical person-like, intelligent, and loving God. More accurately, both ancient, medieval, and most modern Christian theologians understand God as supra-personal but never less than personal. As excessive intelligence and care, the God who is love (1 John 4: 8) is theologically construed as the Trinitarian God of Love. In fact, Christian monotheism is as pure a monotheism as that of Judaism and Islam. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ, however, Christians have learned a new understanding of the reality of that infinite monotheism: following Christian revelation in Jesus Christ, Christians should name the One God revealed in Jesus Christ as the One infinite God who is constituted in its substantial oneness (*ousia*) by the distinct but related infinite 'persons' (*pros-opa*, *per-sonae*) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Christians arrived at their insight into the Trinitarian nature of God gradually in their spiritual journey *ad Patrem, per Filium, in Spiritu*—especially as that classic Christian spiritual pattern is articulated in the prayers in the central Christian mystical event, the eucharist.

Adolf von Harnack made a fatal error when he claimed that early Christianity had been Hellenized and thereby had lost its biblical eschatological character. The opposite, in fact, is the case: Hellenism was Christianized—including, as we shall see later, the transformation of a Platonist metaphysics of transcendence as infinity into a Trinitarian theological metaphysics of the infinite One who as Love is the divine three-in-one.

The many Platonist ways of calling God infinite lasted for a millennium in Christian theology in the West and even longer in the East: in Eastern Christian theologies with some exceptions (e.g. John Zizioulas) from the Cappadocians through Dionysius the Areopagite to Maximus the Confessor to Gregory Palamas and beyond; in Western Christian theology from Augustine through Scotus Eriugena to the Victorines and Thomas Aquinas to Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart to Duns Scotus, Nicholas of Cusa and beyond to the contemporary recovery of a Platonist-like, non onto-theo-logical metaphysics of the infinite in Emmanuel Levinas's already classical work *Totalité et infini*. Indeed, as Emmanuel Levinas publicly stated, we need today to recover 'a new Platonism' beyond the critiques of Plato and Platonism by Nietzsche and Heidegger (see Peperzak 1997: 121).

Furthermore, in Christian theology the Dionysian tradition in Western and Eastern theology has always emphasized the necessary correlative concept to God's infinity, namely, God's incomprehensibility. As we have seen, Gregory of Nyssa persuasively argued against Eunomius that God as infinite is necessarily incomprehensible; Dionysius, with his form of radical mystical theology, tended to emphasize God's incomprehensibility rather than God's infinity.

THE MEDIEVAL DEBATE ON INFINITY AS AN ATTRIBUTE/NAME OF GOD

The principal locus for the medieval discussion of the infinite was the extensive debate on the divine attributes, which was the medieval equivalent of the earlier and later debates on the divine names. Was the infinite rightfully construed one of God's attributes or names? In the medieval West from the late twelfth century forward, Aristotle's teaching on the two kinds of infinity (quantitative and actual) began to prevail among most scholastic philosophers and theologians over the earlier philosophically Platonist and theologically Dionysian and Augustinian strands of the tradition, both of which affirmed God's infinity. Although both Augustine and Dionysius remained, of course, profoundly influential in all Western medieval theology and were always honoured, they gradually became less decisive figures in much scholastic theology influenced

more by Aristotle and the Arab commentators on Aristotle. Dionysius and Augustine, however, remained the pervasive influence in monastic, mystical, and humanist medieval theologies. In addition, the Aristotelian renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was deeply indebted to classical Islamic Aristotelian philosophy and theology in the commentaries (especially Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd) now translated into Latin. By the late twelfth century, most of Aristotle's texts had been translated into Latin (but very few of Plato's) as had several Arabic Aristotelian commentaries as well as some major texts of the Jewish Aristotelian, Moses Maimonides. This flood of Aristotelian texts and commentaries was essential for Scholasticism's powerful drive to rigour, precision, and order. Nevertheless, Aristotelianism never entirely eliminated Neoplatonist influences on medieval theology: Thomas Aquinas, for example, was clearly Aristotelian in argumentative method as well as in an Aristotelian metaphysics of Prime Act (become Thomas's *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) as well as Thomas's use of Aristotelian concepts of potency-act and matter-form. Nevertheless, Thomas employed a Platonist notion of participation and such central Neoplatonist motifs as the *exitus-reditus* framework for his major theological work, the *Summa Theologiae*.

As a result of Aristotle's influence, the majority of Scholastic philosophers and theologians rejected the possibility of an actual infinite and therefore rejected 'infinite' as one of the attributes (or names) of God. Of course, Scholastic theologians like all theologians before and since held that God as God could not be a quantitative infinite. God is eternal, not temporal; God is omni-present not located in space (except in the incarnation). However, since Aristotle had insisted that the notion of a metaphysical actual infinite was logically and metaphysically impossible, the concept of the idea of God as the actual infinite was considered impossible by a majority of the scholastics as one of the attributes or names of God. However, there were two very important dissenting voices affirming infinity as a divine attribute/name: Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The views of Aquinas and Scotus famously clash on many issues, both philosophical and theological, but not on naming God Infinite. Inevitably their arguments for the infinite as a divine attribute or name differed considerably due to their different spiritualities (Thomas's Dominican intellectualism and Scotus's Franciscan voluntarism of love) and, above all, due to their clashing philosophical approaches (Thomas's analogical approach to the divine names was, pace the eclectic and erudite Suarez, in direct non-negotiable opposition to Scotus's logical-metaphysical insistence on univocity).

Thomas Aquinas metaphysically and theologically argued for including the category the infinite as one of the divine attributes (see Aquinas, *Summa* Ia, q. 7, a.1; *I Sententiae* q. 7, a. 43, q. 1). Duns Scotus argued far more boldly in his usual rigorously univocal logic that the infinite was not merely one of the divine attributes but was, in fact, the principal divine name. Thomas Aquinas's distinctly analogical position on the infinite as a divine name and attribute, in later centuries, ensured that the infinite would continue to be a divine name for many thinkers, Thomist and non-Thomist alike. Scotus's insistence on univocity as the proper way for naming the Infinite as God's principal name (see Duns Scotus 1966, 2016) was also very influential in later centuries even among non-Scotists, especially Suarezians. The category of the infinite, although not univocity, was, for example,

deeply influential in seventeenth-century French spirituality and theology: Benoît de Canfeld, Pierre de Bérulle, François de Sales, Blaise Pascal, and as we shall see, François Fénelon. All these classical French Catholic spiritual thinkers of *le grand siècle* in their distinct ways maintained that Infinity was one of God's principal names—indeed, for several, God's principal name. Only after and in spite of these spiritual masters did Suarezian univocity and causality remove a metaphysics and spirituality of the infinite from its central position for naming God in favour of God as onto-theo-logically *causa sui* or supreme Being or ultimate cause.

DESCARTES AND THE IDEA OF THE INFINITE

Two preliminary notes on Descartes before the analysis proper: one philosophical, one religious or spiritual. Philosophically, Descartes, justly named 'the father of modern philosophy', is often misinterpreted, especially by Anglophone interpreters. An all too familiar misinterpretation: Descartes's philosophy beginning with radical doubt is either misread as a new more sophisticated form of seventeenth-century scepticism or as a rationalist foundationalism grounded in the indubitable because clear and distinct evidence of the cogito (among several distinct formulations, *ego cogito*, *ego sum*, and *cogito ergo sum*). Neither interpretation is correct: Descartes's principle of radical doubt is clearly intended by him not as a more radical formulation of scepticism but as a response to scepticism (especially Montaigne); Descartes's cogito principle is indeed one of the two principal foundations of his philosophy (*Meditatio I*), but as *Meditatio III* makes clear, the cogito itself (as finite) must be grounded in the idea of the infinite as its a priori condition of possibility. As recent French scholars (see esp. Marion 1981, 1999; Levinas 1969) have persuasively argued, the idea of the infinite in *Meditatio III* is the foundational Cartesian idea, either as the cause of the finite cogito or, even more radically, as one of those few *instants merveilleux* in the history of philosophy (Levinas). For Levinas the idea of the infinite is the idea by which I think more than I think. Like other *instants merveilleux* in the history of philosophy (Plato's the Good beyond Being and Plotinus's One), Descartes's idea of the infinite is a 'breakthrough' idea that calls into question the rule of causality and the rule of modern rationality. The idea of the infinite is therefore distinct from the subsidiary Cartesian argument also in *Meditatio III* (Descartes 1990: 118–49) that, in terms of causality and rationality alike, the infinite alone must be the rational cause of the finite cogito and as such, for Descartes, the idea of the Infinite could be caused only by God in Godself as the infinite (see Descartes 1990).

The first Cartesian claim (the intuitive idea of the infinite as 'the idea that thinks more than it thinks') should be kept separate, as it seldom is by interpreters, from the argumentative (not intuitive) claim (also in *Meditatio III*) that only God as the Infinite could possibly be the necessary cause of the infinite. Moreover, in *Meditatio V* (Descartes 1990:

168–83), Descartes moves from this earlier argument for the existence of God from ideal effects (not, as in Thomas Aquinas, empirical effects) to a reformulation of Anselm's 'ontological argument' (as Kant later labelled it)—i.e. the argument that the very idea of God as the infinitely perfect One allows one to name God *Causa Sui*. In sum, the idea of infinite perfection allied to the idea of God as infinite yields, Descartes holds, a second proof not from effects but from the very idea of God.

As Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Robert Armogathe have argued (Marion 1998: 265–305; Armogathe 1998: 306–31), Descartes's main names for God (i.e. infinite, incomprehensible power, *summa perfectionem*, *causa sui*) would haunt the entire seventeenth century as major thinker after thinker (Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz) would emphasize one or other of these divine names as the primary divine name in different even conflictual attempts to render metaphysically coherent one or another of the names—increasingly *Causa Sui* became (as in Spinoza) the primary divine name. Martin Heidegger later persuasively argued that *Causa Sui* was the onto-theo-logical name for God. Jean-Luc Marion even declared God as *Causa Sui* an idol.

In sum, Descartes's major philosophical work, the *Meditations*, includes the four principal philosophical positions which most critics and historians of philosophy emphasize: the role of the cogito; the idea of the infinite; the nature of Descartes's new mechanical philosophy of extension constituted solely by efficient causality while eliminating all final causality; the importance of mathematics (with its clear and distinct ideas as the clearest kind of necessary and certain evidence in the new sciences mathematically formulated by Descartes as by Galileo before him and in Newton after him). Mathematically formulated scientific hypotheses were always allied to observation and experiment, not only in Galileo and Newton but also in Descartes. The metaphysical result was clear: Descartes's well-known dualism between matter (*res extensa*) and mind (*res cogitans*), i.e. the thing—*res*—that thinks.

In fact, all four of these Cartesian philosophical positions have proved influential in modern philosophy. In my judgement, however, among the ideas in Descartes's overall philosophy Descartes's idea of the infinite as the idea that thinks more than it thinks is his most original and fruitful insight for naming God metaphysically.

In his philosophy of God, therefore, Descartes proposed several names for God without achieving any internal coherence among them: Incomprehensible Power, the Infinite, *Summa Perfectionem*, and *Causa Sui*. Since Spinoza and Hegel the last divine name, *Causa Sui*, has unfortunately proved Descartes's most influential name in subsequent philosophy at least until Martin Heidegger's devastating critique of it as the very epitome of the onto-theo-logy which Heidegger believed (inaccurately) affects *all* Western metaphysics as distinct from some.

Nevertheless, one name of Descartes for God remains, in my judgement, secure: God as the Infinite One. Like Scotus before him, Descartes, at least in *Meditatio III*, demonstrated the unique status of the idea of the infinite as that idea which allows me to think more than I think. Once united to the traditional idea of perfection as a necessary characteristic of the first principle, the idea of the infinite best defines the idea of God, the infinitely perfect One.

A second point of concern important to the interpretation of Descartes is not philosophical but religious or spiritual, perhaps even implicitly mystical. This concern poses the question central to this chapter. What relevance, if any, has Descartes's philosophy to the question of the relationships of metaphysics, theology, and spirituality (at the limit, mysticism)? The answer is not obvious. First problem: we lack texts to clarify Descartes's possible relationships to the now classical French mystical spirituality of his period. All historians cite Descartes's friendly relationships to Cardinal De Bérulle, starting with the famous meeting at the Papal Nuncio in Paris where the young Descartes first caught Bérulle's attention as the most promising young philosopher who might provide theology—following the virtual collapse of contemporary 'second' scholasticism (mainly Suarezian)—with the 'new philosophy' desperately needed to clarify and defend the faith. Historians have also noted several possible further meetings of Descartes and Bérulle as well as the fact that Descartes did have friendships with other Oratorians in Paris. Unfortunately, however, there is no textual evidence for what was discussed at these meetings. Despite his interest in the Oratorian mystical traditions of spirituality, one can say nothing exact about the possible influences of Bérullian mystical spirituality on Descartes himself. Descartes always longed for solitude to think and fled busy Paris (and therefore his Oratorian spiritual advisers) for Holland. He settled for years in Holland, but even there Descartes moved time and time again to find solitude.

That Descartes was a person of strong Catholic faith is clear. Indeed, occasionally, e.g. at the conclusion of *Meditatio III* (172–73), Descartes will break into Anselm-like praise to the infinite God with a prayer indicative, perhaps, of a contemplative and intuitive temperament akin to mysticism, i.e. as a direct awareness of the presence of God. Such contemplative moments of Descartes can perhaps be called transient mystical moments. Of course, such moments do not pervade the bulk of Descartes's scientific and philosophical thought. For a more explicit mystical character influenced by the new Cartesian philosophy one must turn to François Fénelon, the Cartesian philosopher of an active contemplation of the Infinite and the mystical theologian of pure love and passive contemplation.

As with other Augustinian traditions of the seventeenth century ('the century of Augustine'), Descartes turned inward. Descartes's famous *cogito ergo sum* possessed, as he later realized, real affinities with Augustine's *si fallor, sum* (if I am mistaken, I exist). Moreover, the Platonic side of Descartes (i.e. his contemplative side) allowed him to affirm, with Augustine and the whole Dionysian tradition, that the innate idea of God as infinite and the idea of God as incomprehensible imply each other. Like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine centuries earlier, Descartes understands God as infinite and thereby incomprehensible, not the reverse.

Descartes's philosophical idea of the Infinite can aid a contemporary non onto-theo-logical metaphysical God-language in fundamental theology's reflections on the very intelligibility of the idea of God. Descartes was surely right to insist, following the call of Lateran V, that theology in its apologetic role (today named fundamental theology) should argue metaphysically for the intelligibility of the idea of God without sacrificing divine transcendence—exactly the point of the idea of the infinite God. In

addition, Descartes's metaphysics of the infinite can be employed in systematic theology proper as a valuable philosophical aid that can serve as one element of continuity between fundamental theology's philosophical understanding of God as infinite and systematic theology's understanding of the infinitely infinite Trinitarian God. In my own language, the Christian Trinitarian God is the infinite one who is infinitely triune relations: infinitely *Esse* (Father-Mother), infinitely intelligence-in-act (*Logos*), and infinitely loving (Spirit).

As Levinas argues against Heidegger, Marion, Derrida, Caputo, and many others, metaphysics is 'the most noble' use of reason. A metaphysics of the infinite is a mode of thinking beyond, before and beneath all ontology and beyond the limits of all discursive thought. Some metaphysics (e.g. Hegel) is indeed onto-theo-logical. Most pre-modern and some modern metaphysics, pace Heidegger, is not onto-theo-logical. As a unique mode of thinking, metaphysics articulates the most fundamental relational structures and categories of all reality: the relation of the Other to the Same (Plato's *Sophist*); the relation of *Esse* to all other beings (Thomas Aquinas as interpreted by Etienne Gilson); God as infinite *Ipsium Intelligere* (Thomas Aquinas as interpreted by Bernard Lonergan); the relation of creative process to all realities (Whitehead). Metaphysics, as in the received title of Aristotle's text (which of course was not Aristotle's own title but one contributed by later commentators and librarians), means exactly what the title states: metaphysics is a mode of thinking that is distinct from, indeed the ground of all physics and all physical ontology. Actually any authentic metaphysics (e.g. Plotinus) is the opposite of onto-theology. In contemporary thought, a new metaphysics of the infinite can be construed as a mode of thinking beyond not only mathematical and physical ontologies of the quantitative infinite but beyond all phenomenological, hermeneutical, and historical ontologies. In that sense, meta-physics can today be named not only meta-physics but also meta-history and meta-ontology. Above all, metaphysics is the mode of thinking proper to an understanding of the infinite—that innate idea 'given' to us by the infinite itself: an idea which frees us to think more than we think and allows us, at the limit, to name God the perfect infinite One. Metaphysics frees our thinking intelligibly to affirm the reality of God as infinite and therefore incomprehensible as well as the structural relationship of God's infinite otherness to all other reality. Metaphysics is a mode of thinking based less on dialectical arguments than on an intellectual intuition, which is certainly not identical with mystical intuition of the direct presence of God but is open to all authentic mystical intuition (as Fénelon will demonstrate). Metaphysical thinking is based on *Intellectus* not *Ratio*; *Venunft* not *Verstand*; intuitive contemplation not dialectical-discursive argument although naturally metaphysics will also employ the latter disciplines (e.g. analytical philosophy, scholasticisms, phenomenology, hermeneutics) whenever they are useful to back the intellectual intuition with arguments.

Furthermore, whenever a metaphysics of the infinite is transformed beyond the natural limits of reason through a new Christic understanding of God in God's self-manifestation in the revelation of Jesus Christ as received by individuals and whole communities through faith, hope, and love, then a metaphysics of the infinite God in a fundamental theology can be transformed without loss into the new knowledge of a theological,

indeed religiously mystical-prophetic metaphysics of the infinite Trinitarian God of Love. Bernard Lonergan was characteristically exact in describing faith as 'a new knowledge born of love' (Lonergan 2003: 203). *Fides quaerens intellectum* allows a theologian to affirm that the infinite incomprehensible God of metaphysics can yield to an understanding of the one infinite God who is Love and, as Love, is constituted in the divine Oneness by threefold infinite subsistent relations: the Father-Mother (lover), Son (beloved), and Holy Spirit (the bond—the ultimate gift) binding the three *per-sonae* (or *pros-opa*) with love constituting the one God who is Love (Richard of St Victor).

A new metaphysics of the infinite can affirm, with Plato, the Good beyond Being; with Plotinus, the One-Good beyond Being; with Descartes, God as infinite. However, only God's self-manifestation in revelation can move metaphysical thinking from philosophy to theology: from an intellectual intuition (which even Kant sometimes defended) to a mystical intuition (which Kant always dismissed as nonsense). Moreover, a metaphysically informed theology of the infinite can also open, as in Fénelon and, in a very different manner, in Malebranche, to a mystical faith that is born of a desire constituted by abounding, self-giving, generous love, not a desire solely as lack or need. Such loving and intelligent desire is itself infinite (Gregory of Nyssa's *epektasis*) and led Fénelon to an insight, both cataphatic and apophatic, of an infinite God who as infinite is necessarily incomprehensible: the infinite God is the excess of both intelligence and love; God is pure unbounded love, the God of mystical pure love and graced passive contemplation—as expressed, above all, mystically in Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon and, above all, theologically in François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon. In their sometimes joint, sometimes separate efforts Guyon and Fénelon were both mystics and theologians. However, as they both admitted, Jeanne Guyon was clearly the deeper and more 'permanent' mystic while Fénelon was just as clearly the better educated philosopher and theologian. With the present chapter's emphasis on the relationship of mysticism to philosophy (especially a Descartes-inspired philosophy of the infinite) and theology (especially a theology that unites contemplation and love) we will now turn to an analysis of François Fénelon, whose Cartesian philosophy has received far too little attention from most interpreters of his mystical theology.

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON

As a philosopher (see Gouhier 1977; Devillairs 2007), François Fénelon cultivated, criticized, and expanded the new Cartesian philosophy into a new philosophical theology grounded in the idea of the infinite and in mysticism. With important exceptions like Pierre Gassendi, most of the French thinkers of the seventeenth century (e.g. Malebranche, Bérulle, Bossuet) confirmed the new Cartesian philosophy as able to articulate philosophically the many new physical discoveries (Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Huyghens, Leibniz, Newton, et al.) of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution—the central event in modern Western thought. So important was the scientific revolution for all

Western and eventually global thought, the historian Herbert Butterfield once observed that, compared to the impact of the scientific revolution, even the Renaissance and the Reformation can seem like family quarrels.

François Fénelon, especially in his early work, *Traité de l'existence de Dieu* and his commentary on Descartes (Fénelon 1997) and in his later summary of his thought for the future Regent, was both a philosopher and a theologian. Through the influence of Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon, Fénelon defended (especially against Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet) the genuine mysticism of passive contemplation taught by Guyon as correlated with the philosophical active contemplation of Descartes's idea of the infinite. For Fénelon, Guyon was clearly an authentic and orthodox mystic not, as Bossuet claimed, a Quietist like Miguel Molinos. Indeed, Guyon was the main spiritual writer and profound mystic from whom Fénelon learned the reality of passive contemplation and the reality of pure love which he had earlier observed in reading so orthodox a mystic and theologian as François de Sales. The more one reads the correspondence of Fénelon and Guyon as well as their individual writings the more clear it is that they learned deeply from one another. The Cartesian Fénelon affirmed the reality of mysticism in the person of the non-philosophical but theologically acute mystic Guyon while Guyon learned from the philosophical, historical, and systematic theologian Fénelon more persuasive ways to defend her mysticism as not a novelty at all but in clear agreement with earlier orthodox mystical theologians, especially John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Benoît de Canfeld, Jeanne de Chantal, and François de Sales. Moreover, Fénelon, a brilliant neo-classical rhetorician, also helped Guyon (as witnessed in her 'Clarifications') to temper some of her occasionally excessive rhetoric. The profoundly reciprocal spiritual and intellectual interrelationship of François Fénelon and Jeanne-Marie Guyon is curiously reminiscent of the twentieth-century spiritual and theological relationship of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr. The rejection that some mystics and mystical theologians endured in earlier Catholic history (e.g. Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart) recurred in Fénelon and Guyon. Fénelon's fate involved a Roman condemnation of only certain of his propositions in his *Maxims of the Saints* (especially his somewhat ambiguous statement on 'hope' for personal salvation) which was officially decreed by a mostly reluctant Roman inquiry. Louis XIV exiled him permanently to his see of Cambrai. In fact, Pope Innocent XII was as sympathetically inclined to François Fénelon as Louis XIV was rigorously opposed to him, but Louis XIV (allied to Madame de Maintenon and Bishop Bossuet) ultimately prevailed.

Innocent XII was, in fact, a humane and admirable pontiff who admired Fénelon; hence the papal commission refused the outright condemnation of Fénelon himself insisted upon by Louis XIV. The pope did, however, allow for a condemnation of certain of the *Maxims*—a condemnation which Fénelon accepted publicly with a singular combination of Christian humility and aristocratic panache.

To return to Fénelon's Cartesian philosophy: following Scotus and Benoit de Canfeld (who, some scholars believe, may have actually influenced Descartes either directly through Canfeld's texts or through Descartes's Oratorian friends), Fénelon philosophically developed Descartes's emphasis on the idea of 'the infinite' as the first

and most important name for God. Fénelon (here in opposition to Blaise Pascal) held that Descartes's *Third Meditation* on the idea of the infinite was an authentic philosophical breakthrough in Western philosophy as well as a valuable idea for theology. In this opinion, Fénelon preceded Emmanuel Levinas who, as I have observed, famously named Descartes's 'idea of the infinite' one of the *instants merveilleux* in Western philosophy.

However, on some other Cartesian positions (e.g. final causality) Fénelon did strongly disagree with important aspects of Descartes's philosophy as well as with some facets of Descartes's Augustinianism. In the seventeenth century, most French philosophers and theologians argued over who was more faithful to the polysemic, inexhaustible texts of early, middle, and late Augustine. For Fénelon, Augustine's early more Neoplatonic and dialogical texts (especially *De magistro* and *De libero arbitrio*) were, along with the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, central. For the Jansenists and their fellow travellers like Blaise Pascal, Augustine's later anti-Pelagian texts were the most important Augustinian texts. As the great intellectual historian Henri Gouhier has observed, a good deal of the seventeenth-century argument in philosophy and theology was either an attempt to 'Cartesianize Augustine' (e.g. Malebranche) or to 'Augustinize Descartes' (Bérulle, Arnauld, Fénelon, et al.). The only alternative was to reject Descartes altogether as well as minimize the influence of Augustine in favour of either Aristotle (the neo-scholastics) or of the Stoics (Lessius) or of Epicurus (Gassendi).

Fénelon's major philosophical contribution to this movement to 'Augustinize Descartes' was twofold. First, Fénelon argued in favour of the Neoplatonic Augustinian insistence on the importance of final causality for understanding the physical world against the Cartesian exclusive use of efficient causality. G. W. Leibniz argued even more strongly and persuasively than Fénelon for final causality against Descartes as well as against Spinoza. Second, Fénelon's favourite texts of Augustine alongside the inevitable *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* were *De libero arbitrio* and *De magistro*. For Fénelon the Augustinian doctrine of our 'inner teacher' (Christ) allowed him to suggest that, if Descartes had studied *De magistro*, he could have deepened his understanding of the idea of the infinite as an 'innate idea', by understanding the idea's dependence upon the inner teacher (Christ) who can transform the finite and sinful cogito sufficiently to free it to understand more readily and more deeply the idea of the infinite as the idea of the infinitely loving God incarnate in the ministry, life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

These Fénelonian philosophical and theological Augustinian additions to a basically Cartesian philosophical position freed Fénelon to employ Descartes's philosophy of the infinite as an actively contemplative element open to correlation with his mystical theology of 'passive contemplation'. As Descartes himself rather quietly observed in the *Third Meditation*, an attentive awareness of how the infinite encompasses and grounds the cogito can also allow for the spiritual effect of lessening self-love as the self understands its own finitude grounded in and encompassed by God's infinity. Fénelon advanced this philosophical insight on the infinite as the primary name for God in sublimating it by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the decisive manifestation of infinite

self-giving kenotic love. In sum, the central philosophical idea of the infinite God can—almost naturally—open to the theological idea of God as infinite love.

Although the philosophical idea of the infinite can be defended by dialectical arguments, the basic idea, as noted above, is not grounded in argument but in a contemplative intellectual intuition. On my reading, Fénelon used the idea of the infinite to advance a brilliant theological breakthrough: his implicit paralleling of the range of reason and the range of love. First, the range of reason for Fénelon: reason moves from discursive reasoning (classically dialogue, argumentative dialectic, and persuasive rhetoric) to different forms of contemplation, some of which (active contemplation) are within the usual limits of modern rationality while other forms (mystical passive contemplation) are entirely beyond the usual limits of reason.

Second, the range of the stages of love: here Fénelon described the self's journey from interested self-love alone, to mixed loves (i.e. various combinations of loving God for the self's own interests such as happiness or salvation, mixed with some love of God solely for God's own sake), to the final movement of the mystic's journey, 'pure love' (i.e. completely disinterested love where the self leaves behind all self-interest and loves God solely for God's own sake). Pure love is also sometimes called the 'love of indifference', i.e. the self becomes indifferent to its own needs and desires which are now sublated by the pure love of God. At a controversial extreme (in Guyon, Fénelon, and before them in François de Sales) when the soul experiences pure love for God (i.e. completely disinterested love) the self can even become indifferent to any hope for its own salvation. Bossuet in his reply to Fénelon's *Maxims* understandably criticized Fénelon's seeming abandonment of the theological virtue of hope by pure love. The question of hope also became a major focus of the criticism of Fénelon in the inquiry at Rome. Although Fénelon argued that even the very orthodox François de Sales already spoke of 'holy indifference', this correct historical observation did not help either Guyon or Fénelon himself with most of their critics (especially Bossuet). The logic of Fénelon's position is sound: just as reason deeply attentive to the intuitive idea of the Infinite relies upon an intellect-in-act guided and purified by God's grace in order to experience an actively contemplative intuition which, in turn, is open to the divine absolute grace-gift of passive contemplation, so too, self-interested love, once purified morally, intellectually, and spiritually by human effort cooperating freely with God's grace can be moved by God's grace from every 'impurely' self-interested love to various experiences of mixed love to a completely disinterested mystical 'pure love' of God solely for God's own sake.

A further question emerges. How does the self fully appropriate the intellectual idea of the infinite God not only in the intellect but also in the heart, i.e. the will and the affections? A contrast with Pascal is helpful here (see Pascal 1976). Fénelon would fully agree with Pascal's most famous *pensée*, 'Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.' Fénelon could also agree in principle with what has always seemed to me Pascal's most profound set of insights. First set of insights: we live our lives constituted by a fierce tension within each of us between grandeur (our intelligence-in-act especially manifested in mathematics and science) and our *misère* (sin-evil) resulting from the original Fall and our own confusions, distractions ('divertissements'), and sins. This inevitable tension

within every human being is theologically constituted as the tension disclosed by the theological paradigm of sin/grace and healed only by the grace of Jesus Christ. Second set of insights: these tensions can take very different even conflicting forms in the three basic orders that for Pascal define human life: the order of the flesh, the order of intelligence, and the order of charity. Pascal's brilliant insight into three orders is, I believe, one of the *instants merveilleux* in the history of spirituality and theology.

The first order of the flesh constitutes not only sensuality but also business, politics, and most of everyday life. The second order of intelligence is the rare world of pure ideas or theory—philosophy, theoretical theology, mathematics, theoretical physics, etc. The third order (for Pascal, even more rare than the order of intelligence) is the order of charity, the order of the 'heart' where love rules as grace, as pure gift. In Pascal's extraordinary vision of the three orders, he articulates the following singular insights. First, persons living solely in the world of the flesh cannot understand the way of life of those who live in the world of intelligence: Thales and the milkmaid; Descartes's desperate lifelong search for the kind of solitude which genuine thinking demands; Einstein's impatience with people insisting that he explain relativity theory in ordinary language so 'everyone' can understand it; the contempt that 'reality instructors' (Saul Bellow's term) hurled at all intellectuals in Saul Bellow's brilliant novels. In a directly analogous manner to the lack of understanding of the ideas and mode of living of persons in the order of intelligence by persons living solely in the order of flesh, so too, Pascal insisted, persons who live only in the world of intelligence cannot understand persons living in the order of charity (e.g. saints, mystics, prophets, some artists and some philosophers and theologians). For Pascal, there is a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the order of intelligence and the order of charity. Very few persons experience and understand all the orders. Pascal, himself a mathematician of genius, a brilliant natural scientist and technologist, a Cartesian-informed mechanical philosopher, knew the order of intelligence very well indeed. The 'order of charity' Pascal also experienced—as can be glimpsed in his famous words about his mystical experience in the 'night of fire', written so movingly in the *Memorial* sewn into his clothes and found only after his death. Although not much at home in his own body which was afflicted by seemingly endless illnesses before his early death, Blaise Pascal was otherwise at home in other aspects of the 'world of flesh': church politics (he wrote the devastating *Provincial Letters*); technology (he invented the first computer, as well as the first bus system in Paris mainly to help the poor).

The theological difference between Fénelon and Pascal is crystal clear. For Pascal the gap between the order of intelligence and the order of charity cannot be bridged in any way by intelligence. As a result of this belief, Pascal, despite his acceptance of Cartesian mechanistic understanding of the physical world, insisted that philosophy was useless for understanding the order of love—the order where one can fully believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ and not the God of the philosophers. Hence Pascal insisted that Descartes's mechanical philosophy is very useful for understanding the physical world but 'useless and confusing' for understanding the true God or any other reality in the order of charity. Moreover, Pascal, as much as Fénelon, was both a masterful rhetorician and a good rhetorical theorist. Both Blaise Pascal and François

Fénelon wrote works on the art of persuasion (i.e. rhetoric for 'the heart', the will, and the affections, not for the abstract intellect).

For Pascal, only a self aware of its own *misère* (its sin, its evil, its inevitable tragedy), only the self redeemed by the grace of Jesus Christ, could hope meaningfully to affirm the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ. Fénelon as a Christian thinker also believed that the human situation is characterized by *misère*, although he emphasized its tragedy more than its sin. But there is a great theological difference between them. Fénelon was a theologian more defined by the Catholic grace-nature-grace paradigm; Pascal was formed by the Jansenist theology and its grace-sin-grace paradigm. For Fénelon, therefore, any philosophy (Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, Descartes) which can rationally defend the idea of the Infinite as the primary name of God of course will never replace grace. However, reason itself as graced nature can provide some philosophical point of contact between the order of intelligence and the order of charity. For Fénelon, as for Thomas Aquinas and the early Augustine, the paradigm of grace-nature-grace encompasses and thereby transforms the real but partial late Augustinian paradigm of grace-sin-grace. Hence, for Fénelon, the philosophical situation was not as desperate as Pascal thought. Descartes's philosophy was not 'useless and confused'. On the contrary, for Fénelon, Descartes's philosophical defence of the idea of the infinite was a genuine 'natural' philosophical aid to provide a deep intellectual intuition which could also, once allied to a proper neo-classical rhetoric of persuasion, help to move the heart (the will and the affections) in the right direction towards the 'order of charity'. Of course Fénelon with almost the entire Christian tradition held that only God's grace can guide any possible intellectual move to a reasonable faith. For Fénelon, through God's grace that philosophical possibility is made theologically actual as a mystical immersion in the order of love, i.e., in passive contemplation and pure love.

In my judgement, the incomparable Pascal—that singular mathematical and religious genius—with his insistence on an 'unbridgeable gap' between the order of intelligence and the order of charity was overcommitted to an understandable error in the same way that Karl Barth was in error compared to Friedrich Schleiermacher or Karl Rahner or Paul Tillich. It is true that some errors are enormously fruitful by providing a shock to any intellectual complacency especially if (like Pascal) they employ a rhetoric of such power of excess. Perhaps that is the reason why the reception of Pascal has proved so much more influential in the wider culture than that of Fénelon.

François Fénelon's infinite incomprehensible God and Blaise Pascal's hidden God can each be affirmed as very different theological insights but perhaps not simply opposites. Perhaps, as Cusanus hoped on other philosophical issues, here too there may be the possibility of 'a coincidence of opposites'? Perhaps. To understand God as incomprehensible because infinite, the philosophy of Descartes as reformulated in the theology of Fénelon is in harmony with passive graced mystical contemplation and mystical pure love. Surely, this is indeed an entirely sound Christian option. To understand God with Pascal theologically as the hidden God of infinite suffering love through the cross of Jesus Christ (and therefore to understand life through the intense tragic suffering caused by evil) is indeed a different but equally sound Christian option. Why should one insist

that one must, once and for all, choose between them? Life itself includes different moments (different passions, emotions, moods). There are moments of great joy in life—in love, in play, in intellectual intuitions like the idea of the infinite in the sense of incomprehensible mystery in joyful limit-experiences and, at times for some, conscious awareness of the presence of God, mystical awareness.

At other moments, in other moods (Heidegger's revelatory *Stimmungen*), there are experiences of tragic awareness of our sin, our seemingly unbreakable exclusive self-involvement, our sense of the void (as in Martin Luther's notion of a second form of the hidden God different from revelation of God's hiddenness in Christ's cross). What scepticism was to the seventeenth century (its major intellectual issue) nihilism is to the twenty-first century. In response to that sense, Christian figures like Blaise Pascal will always speak. The Christian God is both infinite-incomprehensible and radically hidden. One should allow each naming of God—incomprehensible or hidden—its Christological emphasis (incarnation for incomprehensibility; cross for hiddenness). Each can serve as a genuine Christian option—open to different cultures, situations, and temperaments.

Western religious thought, including theology, would be greatly impoverished if either Pascal or Fénelon, either Kierkegaard or Newman, either Simone Weil or Jeanne Guyon, either Karl Barth or Karl Rahner, either ethics or aesthetics, prophecy or mysticism were eliminated from the ever-changing canon of Western religious thought, including mystical theology. Let the giants clash; let them converse; let them be.

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Daniélou (1997); Descartes (1990); Levinas (1969); Plotinus (1966–88).

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CHAPTER 23

THE MYSTICAL—OR WHAT THEOLOGY CAN SHOW

JEAN-LUC MARION

TRANSLATED BY KATHLEEN McNUTT

EVEN access to the notion of ‘mystical’ seems unspeakably problematic in our time. It is not that we ignore the possibility of psychological states outside the realm of experience supposed to be normal and standard for the psyche. To the contrary, we have only too many incentives to take refuge in artificial paradises, ever renewed and ever more dangerous. But we doubt, and with good reason, that these psychological states can give us access to truth of any kind, since they merely return us to ourselves, even imprison us in the inanity of our psyche. This profound distrust doubles when it comes to God and theology: we cannot help but fear that, in this domain, recourse to what we mean spontaneously today by ‘mystical’ covers a name so formal that it has become imprecise, the *entrée* into the irrational par excellence, into that which can be neither said nor seen. The obscuring of the real meaning of what modernity understands, or rather *no longer* understands, as ‘mystical’—that is to say the obscuring of this *mustêrion*—has been made perfectly clear by contemporary research (McGinn 1991; Bouyer 1986); we will not go over it again. Nevertheless, it is suitable to moderate this rejection and this mistrust. For if, at the turn of the modern era, ‘mystical theology’ was thematized and isolated as such, this was in order to oppose it to two other theologies, one ‘scholastic’, the other ‘positive’, with which, it was admitted, the whole of Christian experience, of ‘the revelation of the *mustêrion* unspoken for eternal ages’ (Rom. 16: 25) could no longer be accounted for. Yet—all of the Christian faith supposes this—this *mustêrion* is in fact given to us to know: ‘To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matt. 13: 11 and par.). Thus it is necessary not only that theology be made mystical, but that *all* theology, including that which privileges concepts or the history of the development of dogma, leads to the mystical. And thus it is necessary that all theology also proceeds from the mystical.

But can it, and can it today, in the time of nihilism? For the fact is that theology has often ratified modern metaphysics' decision: 'mystical' can qualify only what does not fall under the gaze of objective knowledge, what cannot become an object of certitude—and that moreover without much precision, even with a necessary imprecision. To the point that, to cover the breadth of this non-objectivity, we have even risked the (though theologically unacceptable) term 'natural mysticism', of which 'supernatural mysticism' constitutes but one species, just as irrational. Yet a remark of Wittgenstein should alert us. Even while he admits, on the margins of what philosophy can and must know, the element that he qualifies as *das Mystische*—in this case the fact *that* the world is—and declares it inexpressible and unknowable, he adds: 'There is nevertheless the inexpressible. This *shows itself*, it is the mystical' (*Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliche. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische*: Wittgenstein 1980: 82). Let us understand: what cannot be said with an expression, shows itself. Or again: even what cannot be said expressly, can show itself. This distinction contradicts what common sense, even common sense instructed by philosophy, admits more willingly: that which does not say itself cannot show itself either; or again: that which says itself, often says what it nevertheless does not show. The whole menace of scepticism, that of making a mistake in speaking, rests upon the fear that we speak without showing anything, that we say too much in relationship to what shows itself, that the signification and the meaning that we want to say finds no phenomenon, no intuition to confirm it. Yet Wittgenstein expresses the inverse proposition: 'the mystical' lets that which we cannot express be nevertheless shown; and it is not the thing that is lacking (here, *that* the world is), but the words to say it. Consequently, *the* mystical presents a difficulty not because we speak about it in order to say nothing and without seeing anything that shows itself (as in voluntary deceit or involuntary error), but totally the opposite: because we cannot express, say, show words, expose in concepts that which yet never ceases to show itself, to appear, to make itself seen, 'as [one] looks to the sight of mysterious things, *peri ta mustika themata*' (Luibhead et al. 1987: 135). Thus, far from mystical experience being all talk, it lacks words. It does not lack aim, or vision, or phenomenon, or themes, but it remains mute before them, powerless to say, express, and think them. It does not delude itself; it remains voiceless. Therefore the question is transformed and, in a sense, simplified: does not theology—which itself also claims to speak, or rather *not to be able to truly speak* about what, by faith, it believes, that is to say about what it already sees 'in a mirror darkly' (1 Cor. 13: 12)—find itself, inevitably and by definition, confronted with the 'mystical'? And in this case, must it not ponder the phenomenal situation of that which shows itself without, for all that, being perfectly said and expressed? In this case, theology must recognize itself par excellence as 'mystical theology', confronted with an appearance that is not illusory (a simple appearance), but unsayable, at least in part and for this time?

Yet there is a philosophical discipline which has precisely for its ambition and its definition to disclose that which at first glance does not show itself and does not speak itself, in order to make it a phenomenon which eventually finds its full meaning and thus the words to say it: phenomenology. Indeed, according to a famous declaration of Heidegger, 'What must phenomenology "make seen"? What can we call, in a meaningful sense,

“phenomena”? What is, by its essence, *necessarily* the theme of making something evident? Clearly, it is that which absolutely *does not* show itself initially and for the most part; that which, contrary to what shows itself initially and for the most part, remains *hidden*, but which at the same time belongs essentially to that which shows itself initially and for the most part, so that it constitutes its meaning and ground’ (Heidegger 1963: section 7). Heidegger, who doubtless did not consider Dionysius, nevertheless sees the paradox: to think that which shows itself requires, sometimes and in the end, thinking also that which does not show itself ‘initially and for the most part’. Phenomenology confronts what shows or should show itself, without our being able to express and describe it, in short, to say it, right away. To enter into the visible, it is necessary also to penetrate into the invisible that makes it thinkable—and this, even if what shows itself without yet showing itself remains unsayable. That about which we can say nothing demands much more than our silence, because it alone allows access to everything that shows itself. Must we conclude, without other considerations, that theology, in order to become a mystical theology, as it must, must adopt the path and the method of phenomenology?

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Certainly not. For, if it is necessary here to believe Heidegger about this—which we must take particularly seriously, because, as he said in 1951, ‘I come from theology and I still keep an old love for it’ (Heidegger 1951: 437)—we ought to hold, to the contrary, that ‘the concept of a Catholic phenomenology is even more contradictory than the concept of Protestant mathematics’ (Heidegger 1985: 28). Let us notice that he thus meets (*de facto* and doubtless contrary to his intention) the position of the Catholic magisterium, which recently confirmed that:

the Church does not offer its own philosophy, nor does it canonize any particular philosophy to the detriment of others. The deep reasoning for this reserve resides in the fact that philosophy, even when it enters into relation with theology, must proceed according to its own methods and rules; otherwise, there would be no guarantee that it remain turned toward the truth and that it aim toward it with a rationally verifiable approach. (John Paul II 1998)

More trivially, recent polemics have moreover popularized this caution, highlighting that, by definition of its method and presuppositions, phenomenology recuses the least ‘theological turn’ at the outset and from its Husserlian origins (Janicaud 1991, 1998; Benoist 2001; Marion 2005). Even so, thought is found in thinking, as movement is proved in walking, and a number of phenomenological works have, for more than twenty years, established as fact that phenomenology has largely not only been able to apply itself to theological questions, but to find in them an interest essential to its own deployment. To be convinced of this, one must only consider the latest works published by Levinas, Ricoeur, Henry, and Derrida (to mention only the French-speaking area and the greatest most recently deceased, without mentioning those who pursue this powerful tradition today). Such a reconsideration of the theological field by thinkers reclaiming theology is that much more striking as it concerns all denominations,

Christians as much as Jews or the undecided, even the perfectly atheist. It is not, then, a restoration by theologians of, or a detour by ideologues to, a philosophical method, but rather a spontaneous, almost uncontrolled, even involuntary movement, thus even more powerful than phenomenology itself, deploying itself in fields new to it, but which always return to theology, or, if we prefer, to philosophy of religion, even religious studies. Even I myself have tried, in previous works (see Marion 1993), to pose a question of principle, formulated with terms that I can revise today: 'Metaphysics and phenomenology. A relief for theology' (Marion 2005; Garziano 2013). It is to this revision that I would like to proceed here, at least in sketch.

I must begin by admitting and identifying the obstacles that, in theory (that is to say, in theoretical practice, in effectiveness of thought) seem to compromise the use of phenomenological procedures in the field of what it remains fitting to call theology. Fitting—in the sense that the debate supposes a clear and firm distinction between theology and philosophy, a distinction that, perhaps, philosophy can no longer justify with as much assurance as in the early modern period, at least if it truly considers its contemporary situation. I can raise three obstacles.

First, methodological atheism. Husserl (1950) demanded this the moment he introduced the canonical definition of the phenomenological reduction, in 1913: 'The existence of an extrawordly divine Being... would be transcendent to "absolute" knowledge' (see also Housset 2012). The reduction implies the bracketing of all transcendence, both of the horizontal transcendence, so to speak, of the intrawordly object (the world-region), and the vertical transcendence of a God exercising the function of foundation for the world. In moving the centre of the reduction from the *I* to *Dasein*, Heidegger would remain faithful to this bracketing: 'Philosophical research is and remains an atheism' (Heidegger 2006). Which confirms, but also nuances, this other text: 'The point of departure of fundamental ontology brings with it the *appearance* of an individualistic and extreme atheism' (Heidegger 1997). The reduction, transcendental or existential (which remains, in a sense, quasi-transcendental), implies bracketing everything that remains exterior to consciousness; all transcendence, thus including the vertical transcendence of God. Atheism is radicalized here so much the more (not so much the *less*) as it remains methodological (without disintegrating into dogmatic atheism). God does not simply elevate phenomenology, because he escapes phenomenality; and he escapes it because he is no part of the experiences of consciousness, nor of the immanent region, the consciousness-region.

The second obstacle has to do with the derivative character, in a problematic sense, of access to the world itself. Either (for Husserl) the world remains the object of a reconquest—the reconquest of its existence in itself, against the phenomenism of the Kantian heritage—but the danger of solipsism still remains present, even if only in the ambiguity of the noumenal itself. Or (with Heidegger) 'being-in-the-world' is enough to put an end to the Kantian (and Husserlian) question of a 'scandal of philosophy'—the absence of a convincing demonstration of the existence of material things and of the exterior world—but this world must no longer be defined as a subsistent being (*vorhanden*), because it only encounters 'being-in-the-world' as usual being (*usuel*, *Zeug*, *zuhanden*), incapable of serving as the foundation of an ontology, even less of a reopening of the

Seinsfrage, a privilege reserved to *Dasein* only. In this context, the point of departure for a theology of the real world becomes null, or at least perfectly doubtful.

There remains a third obstacle: the definition of what comes after the subject, in the metaphysical sense. Does the transcendental reduction demand the exercise of an *I* that is itself transcendental? What validity can such an *I* retain from the point of view of theology? Can it pray and praise? Is it also able to accede to any Other, a *You* or the *He* (even an *Us*), that does not amount either to an object (human, empirical, derived), or an abstract double (Husserl 1963: 146; see also Heidegger 1962: 124) of this (transcendental) *I*? The transcendental *I*, which the phenomenological reduction seems to impose, here presses the menace of solipsism in the direction of intersubjectivity; even reconstructing a phenomenality of the Other by analogy and appresentation, or by the One (*das Man*) and the variations of *Mitsein*, only reinforces its derivative character. In fact, this difficulty comes back to the status of the *I*: mustn't we conceive the *I* in a non-transcendental mode? But can we do this, and on what condition?

These three closures to transcendence (God, the world, and the other), which seem to close off three of the primordial dimensions of the field of Christian theology, all result from the reduction, which here can only privilege transcendental egoism. The question thus becomes unique under three figurative differences: does not the reduction forbid, in principle, phenomenology's access to the domain claimed by theology—God revealing Godself from Godself, the world as created as the 'book of Nature' written by God, and the originary community of who the *I* is with its *alter egos*? Theology, then, has never seemed, without losing itself, to be able to substitute phenomenological presuppositions (which do not pose, at least retrospectively, the question of the legitimacy or appropriateness of other presuppositions, for example those drawn from scholastic *metaphysica*) for its current philosophical presuppositions. Thus, even in its methodological 'atheism', phenomenology poses to theology the general question of philosophical presuppositions. But this second question, that of method, can put phenomenology even more essentially into question than theology.

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For phenomenology is not defined once for all. It is characterized by new results, which accumulate in it as it advances. From its origins, phenomenology has developed as a philosophy ahead of itself (*praeceps*) and thus also ahead of its a priori, a philosophy in which what comes afterward and second always determines what comes before and in the first place. Its method is practised backward and a posteriori from the origin, or rather the original, in relationship to which the beginning always seems late. Thus let us see phenomenology according to and from its advances, which the beginning only sketches and presents.

The first advance concerns the right to appear, or, more exactly, concerns appearing as that which ensures a right to phenomenality. 'To the principle of all principles: *that* everything *that* offers itself to us originally in "intuition" . . . must be received simply as it is given, *but also* only in the limits in which it gives itself, in this no sophisticated theory can lead us into error' (Husserl 1950: 52). Appearance applies to appearing, because

appearance already offers, *as such*, an appearing being: 'So much appearance, so much Being (*Soviel Schein, soviel Sein*)' (Husserl 1963: 133; Herbart 1806: 187; Heidegger 1962: 36). From which it follows that what appears no longer references itself, even negatively, as an appearance to being; in fact, as appearance, it already appears and thus enjoys the *right of all* phenomenality. How? In that everything that appears, in whatever manner and to whatever degree it practises appearance, already offers itself and, in offering itself, shows itself. Heidegger recognized the phenomenon as 'that which shows itself, the Self-showing, the manifest (*das, was sich zeigt, das Sichzeigende, das Offenbare*)... the self-showing-in-itself (*das Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende*), the manifest'. It follows from this that 'Phenomenology thus means: *apophainestai to phainomenon*: letting what shows itself as it shows itself in itself, show itself in itself' (Heidegger 1962: 28 and 36). It is in itself that the phenomenon shows itself, as the thing even that it rebecomes, against the Kantian split between the phenomenon and the thing in itself. The in-itself manifests in itself and from itself, of its own initiative. But to accomplish this reversal, more is required than the self-showing of the phenomenon: for what shows itself only shows itself, Husserl specifies, in the exact measure as it *gives itself*. To show itself *in person* is only possible if what shows itself also and first *gives itself*. From whence the new principle: 'So much reduction, so much givenness.' Givenness, understood as the movement of committing and abandoning oneself to and as gift (whatever name or definition we can give it), defines the truth and the phenomenological legitimacy of the appearing. One only appears in person by showing *oneself*, that is to say, one *gives oneself*.

Thus the reduction does not finally lead to the subjectivity of the *Erlebnis*, but, to the contrary, the experience of consciousness has authority in phenomenality only inasmuch as it accomplishes givenness, where the phenomenon commits itself in person. Not only to be constituted in an object, nor in a being, but to show itself as given. Everything that shows itself gives itself, even if not everything that gives itself shows itself.

This first advance leads to two others as its corollaries. First, an ontological, or, more exactly, mis-ontological corollary: if the reduction is accomplished in view of the given and according to the criterion of the givenness of that which shows itself, there is no constraining reason to link the phenomenological exercise (the reduction) directly to the ontic or ontological question. Unless one considers the ontic or ontological instance as one of the responses to, and one of the names of, self-giving itself (that which can be conceived, but is not inevitable), there would be no reason to worry that ontology (in the metaphysical sense) would become impracticable (according to the habitual neo-Thomist posture, or more generally, out of concern for 'completing' phenomenological subjectivity with the ontic objectivity of a metaphysics) (cf. Marion 2015). There is especially no motive for submitting the *Gottesfrage* to the *Seinsfrage*, at the risk of producing the idolatrous figure that part of Heidegger's thought points to. God's self-manifestation gives itself first because every manifestation is measured formally against the givenness in it; so, *par excellence*, God's manifestation; but also because God gives Godself so much more that he really gives himself as gift in the radical and unsurpassable sense of 'God is love' (1 John 4: 8). And thus his manifestation (his self-revelation) must be understood and received as it announces and gives itself, first as gift and love, before any other determination or horizon, even those of beingness and objectivity. If 'God is

greater than my heart' (1 John 3: 20), a fortiori he is greater than the most vast concept in my understanding, the *conceptus entis*. Phenomenology thus cannot not liberate the *Gottesfrage* from the limits of the *Seinsfrage*.

Whence comes the second corollary, which specifies the first and deduces from it the refusal to identify every phenomenon as an object. If the phenomenon shows itself in the measure in which it gives itself, then it appears infinitely more if it comes as a passing event than if it subsists permanently as an object. The status of object, to the contrary, remains only an extreme, rare, and provisional case of a phenomenality emptied of all event-ness, a laboratory hypothesis and a thought experiment, always already surpassed by the eventness even of this experiment and this thought. Thus, in good contemporary phenomenology, it is necessary to try to substitute, for the distinction of objects into phenomena and noumena (established by Kant and taken up by the whole Kantian heritage, analytic philosophy in particular), the distinction of phenomena into objects on the one hand and events on the other (Marion 2010a). From which follows a radically non-metaphysical redefinition of the modalities of the possible and the impossible. We can understand these modalities in two opposite manners. Either the possible remains pre-thought from essence, itself predetermined by the concept in conformity with the principle of non-contradiction and in simple expectation of effectiveness, which would ensure the principle of sufficient reason (*existentia, complementum possibilitas*). Or the possible, understood as the unexpected, without pre-vision of its essence possible through or even against representation, is expected as an event coming from itself and giving itself. This radical turn sheds new light on possible phenomena that, freed from the prohibitions of a priori metaphysics, would then appear as possible events in a new sense, that is to say as impossible objects in the sense of the postulates of empirical thought in general.

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From these profound modifications of the original terms of phenomenology, there follow at least two new operations: the saturated phenomenon and the gifted.

First, the saturated phenomenon. The phenomenon, taken in its classic, that is to say formal, meaning, common to Kant and Husserl, is defined by the duality within it of intuition (fulfilment) and intention (meaning or concept). When intuition fills up the concept, even partially but sufficiently, it validates it, and reciprocally this concept identifies the appearance of diversity in an appearance of the object. And if, exceptionally, intuition fills the concept without remainder, totally, adequately—in short, if intuition is equal to the intended concept, we speak of evidence: in this case, validation reaches the level of complete verification. Evidence, this subjective flip side of truth, is accomplished when intuition, which is most often lacking or defective in comparison to the concept, corresponds to it perfectly. But neither Kant nor Husserl envisions a third disposition: in effect, intuition not only can be lacking with regard to, or be equivalent to, the meaning (or the concept), but can *surpass* it. To surpass here means that intuition arises out of proportion to the supposed concept or meaning, to foresee it, organize it, synthesize it, constitute it, and make it conceivable. In short, the diversity of intuition can, sometimes and doubtless more often than we think, not let itself be adequately synthesized

(or constituted) by a concept (or a meaning). In such a case intuition overflows the supposed concept or concepts in order to attach a meaning to them and no longer appears as an object. Then it is a saturated phenomenon, in which intuition overflows that which can understand a meaning or a concept in it. But that it does not appear as an object does not prevent the saturated phenomenon from nevertheless appearing in another way and appearing to an *I*, who, at the same time, must also change to another mode than that of a transcendental *I*. Thus, the *I* responds to the saturated phenomenon as the gifted. The saturated phenomenon thus reverses and completes the categorial determination of the phenomenon as an object.

Let us clarify the traits of the saturated phenomenon by reversing the guiding principles of the categories of phenomenality established by Kant.

According to quantity: instead of being foreseen by the axioms of intuition (each phenomenon has a quantity that can be foreseen from the sum of its parts), certain (saturated) phenomena prove unforeseeable, because they exceed the sum of their parts. This is called the *event*, which arises without a foreknown cause, without any advance prediction showing or even conceiving it as a whole, and which keeps prolonging itself by surpassing its consequences, as unforeseeable as the first.

According to quality: instead of being experienced and endured according to the anticipations of perception (every phenomenon has a quality which assigns it a degree according to which its reality is measured), there are (saturated) phenomena that are unbearable with regard to quality, because they exceed the degree of intensity that a finite sensibility can endure. This is called the *idol*, which imposes such a degree of intuition upon the gaze that it fills it, to the point that the gaze can no longer organize intuition in an object or experience this intuition, now without synthesis, as a spectacle of an object. Rather, the gaze experiences the intuition as a state of the subject undergoing something it can no longer manage to synthesize; in short, like the invisible mirror of this same gaze.

According to relation: instead of being related to another phenomenon according to the analogies of experience (no phenomenal object can appear unless it is linked conceptually with another, as an accident to a substance, as an effect to its cause, as a substance to another substance), there are (saturated) phenomena absolved from all relation, because they come without any other reference but to themselves. This is called par excellence *my flesh*, relative only to itself and affected only by itself before being (and in order to be) able to then let itself be affected by something else.

Finally, according to modality: instead of always and on principle relating to the gaze of the *I* according to the postulates of empirical thought in general (no phenomenon can be synthesized in an object if it does not relate to either formal conditions for possibility, material conditions for effectiveness, or universal conditions for the necessity of experience), there are (saturated) phenomena free of the requirements of the transcendental gaze, phenomena that are unregardable and unconstitutable in objects within a finite phenomenological field. This is seen par excellence in the *face* of the Other or the *icon*, who, facing me, looks at me without allowing itself to be regarded.

But in each of these cases one will ask, doesn't the irreducible resistance to a priori conditions of objectification quite simply forbid phenomenality? This is what metaphysics (Kant) and even the first phenomenology (Husserl in 1913) assume. It is also what more

recent phenomenology, in fact all phenomenology since Levinas, has, rightly, progressively contested. For there remains another hypothesis: that phenomena truly appear without being subject to synthesis or constitution, without passing under the yoke of formal or material *a priori*. To admit of phenomena that are not at the disposal of their so-called conditions of possibility does not imply their inability to appear, but only that their appearing comes counter to the conditions of finitude; in other terms, that 'pearance' (*doxa*) comes counter to the expectation and capacity of the *I*, thus as *para-dox*, as counter-appearance. Paradox does not name a non-appearing, but an appearing that contravenes the finite conditions of appearing, that is to say a counter-experience. Counter-experience does not imply the suspension of appearing, but a phenomenality ruled by the very thing that appears, and no longer ruled only by the receptivity of the one to whom it appears and for whom it can only appear, so to speak, as a contradiction. Counter-experience means that the thing itself and the perturbations that its appearing imposes upon the receiver appear *at the same time*. Only in this condition without conditions is the famous but habitually misunderstood and limited 'return to the things themselves!' fulfilled: for we only return to them in admitting their in-themselves; that is, what in this very appearing does not allow itself to be submitted to the conditions of objectification according to our *a priori*. Only thus is the phenomenological reduction fulfilled to its unconditional end: the given must be received as it gives itself, precisely as given without any other limit than possibly, in the case of a saturating intuition, the overflow of the object.

Counter-experience, thus including a possible overflow of the object by the given, implies a questioning, thus a reimplication, of the *I* as well (or even first), which subjects it to the reduction to the given. How to think an *I* conformed to the demands of the given, thus sometimes faced with the saturated phenomenon? By thinking it according to the demands of the given, no longer as that which understands the given (in an object, by constitution), but as that which receives it without fixing it with a *a priori*. What does it mean to not fix it with a *a priori*, if not that the *I* imposes itself as the *a priori par excellence*, but the only one who does not subject the given? Thus we must also and first think the *I as given*, as the first given. The first given means the one who, in receiving the given, does not precede it, does not expect it to be already lying in wait near a givenness in which it refuses to take part. Only an *I* already and from the outset included in givenness can truly be exposed to a possible saturated phenomenon, to a possible excess of intuition over concept (or meaning), to a possible counter-experience. Such an *I*, or rather such an *ego*, must thus no longer receive the given by remaining outside givenness (as one would receive a delivery unloaded from a docked ship onto the firm surface of the quay, without floating like the merchandise) but must *receive itself* at the same time and as much as it receives the given that shows itself—must receive itself as just as given (even more) than that which thus gives itself, as a consequence and possibly, to it. Such an *ego* given from the outset and without reservation thus alone would satisfy the demands of givenness, which it thus accepts as the unique *a priori*. Such a decidedly *a posteriori* *ego* can no longer be conceived as an empirical *me* (which only has meaning in contrast to a transcendental *I*), and we must call it a gifted *ego*—that which does not

appear from itself (does not return to itself, does not regain consciousness, including self-consciousness) except insofar as at the moment when, and as often as, it receives a given, it is out of proportion with its expectation and its capacity for reception. The gifted is only born with the given from which it receives itself in receiving it.

If the present moment of phenomenology leads, in one way or another, to these two results, the saturated phenomenon and the gifted (and maybe our nomenclature is not limited incidentally to one 'trend' among others, but with the required mediations and interpretations it accedes to numerous other nomenclatures that amount in a radical sense to the same thing), what consequences follow? This is not the place to sketch these consequences for phenomenological philosophy, even if they have begun to be deployed today before our eyes. It is, however, the place to examine the consequences, or at least the possible consequences, for Christian theology.

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Theology, just because it must follow the requirements absolutely proper to the event (and not to the object) which calls it after having provoked it, never ceases to rest upon languages and concepts, those of each era, but always rectifies and amends them in order to be able to respond to that with which it deals. But it deals with revelation, the very self-revelation of God in the Christ, Jesus. Among these languages and concepts, we have privileged that of being (understood according to *metaphysica* or the *Seinsfrage*), along with its derivatives, hermeneutics, dialectic, rhetoric, etc. Yet it is necessary to consider a primordial characteristic of God's revelation: in biblical terms, it is presented as a matter of manifestation, thus of phenomenality: 'The light appears (*phanei*) in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it' (John 1: 5). And it appears in relationship to the darkness that it indicated by contrast, as 'a lamp that shines (*lukhnos phainon*) in a dark place' (2 Pet. 1: 19), so that it glows in order to make the darkness disappear according to its manifestation: 'The darkness is passing and already the true light is appearing (*phainei*)' (1 John 2: 8). From this radically phenomenal character of revelation follow two inevitable and directly linked consequences.

The first essential point is related to the crisis provoked by the manifestation of God: the visibility of God also shows the invisibility of all that does not appear in this manifestation. Indeed, this light can only appear in contrast with that which it makes appear precisely as not appearing; it makes the unappearance of darkness appear as it makes the light appear. The revelation of the Christ, the measure of itself, is also imposed as the measure of what it rejects, or rather of what rejects it. The world does not precisely see such a distinction between what appears and what does not appear, because the two terms do not see each other. Or more exactly, the world does not see that which appears only to God, who sees both what appears and what is hidden. Thus the 'hypocrites appear (*phainôsin*) to men' when they pretend to pray before them, while 'your Father who sees (*blêpon*) in secret' sees the true prayer, which does not appear 'outside, to men' (Matt. 6: 4-5). Certainly, 'life appeared (*ephanerôthê*), we have seen it, we testify to it and declare to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and which has appeared to us

(*ephanerôthe*)' (1 John 1: 2), but 'what we will be is not yet manifest (*oupô ephanerôthe*)' (1 John 3: 2; Col. 3: 4). The light in which the self-revelation of God is manifested puts the visible entirely in crisis, because the visibility of God, by its inevitable excess, makes all other visibility obscure by comparison, to the point that this lesser light, which discovers itself darkened by contrast, can will to exercise itself as a voluntary darkness—as that which wills not only to resist the light, but to 'devour and offend it (*katalambanein*)' (John 1: 5).

Thus the other essential point is imperative: this irruption (and the conflict of phenomenality that it cannot not provoke) is accomplished in the details of the whole life of the Christ, or more exactly in the manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth *as* the Christ. Christ's manifestation happens like that of a phenomenon, still more of a unobjectifiable phenomenon, unconstitutible and irreducible for those who see it, taking the characteristics of the saturated phenomenon to the extreme (Marion 1997). The Christ imposes himself as the phenomenon without comparison or antecedent, for 'nothing similar has ever appeared (*ephanê*) in Israel' (Matt. 9: 33). It is 'lightning which goes out from the East and manifests (*phainetai*) as far as the West' (Matt. 24: 27); yet the lightning does not designate a light constituting the accidental attribute of an object or being that moreover remains in its obscure substratum. Rather, the lightning consists only in its manifestation; not because it lacks a substratum, but because its character as event discloses itself so perfectly that nothing in it remains unmanifested and that if it consists, it consists only in this event that happens entirely in its appearing (Nietzsche 1885: 101; see Marion 2010a: 274). The phenomenon that assigns its pure brightness to this place, the Christ, sheds light as a lightning bolt cuts through the night, making the night as such disappear. The question about Jesus—must we recognize in him the Christ, the Son of God?—takes place and is decided entirely in terms of manifestation, that is to say of phenomenality: what must be admitted as an appearing by rights, what must be rejected as an appearance without the rights of an appearing (an imposter, illusion, 'blasphemy')? The decision of faith, which finally is decisive, is after all a matter of the acceptance (or refusal) of saturated phenomena, which escape our full constitution, because in them the excess of intuition (of glory, of manifestation, etc.) incomparably exceeds what our concepts (our words, thoughts, etc.) can recognize.¹ Every person finally finds himself or herself in the situation of Peter, witness to the Transfiguration, who 'did not know what he was saying' (Luke 9: 33), or of the pilgrims to Emmaus, who saw without

¹ The question is phenomenological not because there is difficulty in seeing Jesus, but because there is extreme difficulty in seeing him as Son of God: to proclaim 'Truly this man was the Son of God' (Mark 15: 39), one must 'see the earthquake' (Matt. 27: 54), 'see what has happened' (Luke 23: 47); i.e. one must see the event of the cross in light of the prophecy of Zech. 12: 10: 'They will look upon the one they have pierced' (as in John 19: 37); or, see the phenomenon as it gives itself, from God's own point of view upon Jesus. Only this course of action (seeing the phenomenon as it gives itself, from the point of view of its in-itself and not as we constitute it in one object among others) allows one to see God in gazing upon the Christ, or—what amounts to the same thing—to see Jesus as the Christ (John 8: 19, 14: 9, 16: 3). But, to enter into the phenomenological reversal and the hermeneutical circle, whoever says, and thus first *sees*, that 'You are the Christ, the son of the living God', it must be, as with Peter, that the Father himself gives this to the one who says it (Matt. 16: 13–17).

understanding, 'stupid and slow to believe' (Luke 24: 25; see Marion 2010b). Faith consists, in phenomenological (and, previously, Augustinian) terms, in believing a meaning that one cannot define, an intentionality one cannot see, a concept one cannot conceive of, in order thus paradoxically to understand *from oneself* a phenomenon the intuition of which exceeds one.

From then on, the whole public life of Jesus, his whole manifestation as the Christ, takes place in terms of appearing and phenomenality. Thus, what we too quickly name miracles consist in fact each time, like the amazing feat done at Cana, in a manifestation. 'This was the beginning of the signs of Jesus at Cana in Galilee, and he manifested his glory (*ephanērōsen tēn doxan*) and his disciples believed in him' (John 2: 11). Thus the Transfiguration, in which the Christ 'shows himself (*ôphthē*)' (Matt. 17: 3 = Mark 9: 4 and Luke 9: 30), anticipates the resurrection, in which 'he shows himself (*ôphthē*)' in the same terms and situations (Luke 24: 34 = 1 Cor. 15: 5). Namely: first, *from himself and of his own initiative*, not as an objective phenomenon that comes to show itself at our initiative, but as an event that comes when and 'where it will' (John 3: 8). Next, according to a saturating intuition, which exceeds what our mode of experience in this world allows: 'the form (*eidos*) of his face became other' (Luke 9: 29), he 'changed (*metemorphôthē*) before them' (Mark 9: 3), to the point where the 'dazzling (*lian*) whiteness' of his clothes surpassed what 'anyone *on this earth* (*epi tēs gēs*) could ever bleach' (Mark 9: 3). Jesus manifests himself as the 'beloved Son' of the Father in putting on a whiteness from another world, thus a saturating intuition in this one. Par excellence, the resurrection imposes 'another form (*etera morphē*)' (Mark 16: 12) so that the Christ 'appears (*ephanē*)' to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16: 9) as he 'appeared (*ephanērôthē*)' also to the disciples (John 21: 14, see 21: 1). Here the excess of intuition over any concept reaches its peak, since the resurrection of a dead man precisely defines what remains inconceivable for us; in metaphysical terms, impossible: what the concept forbids. But this impossibility also exactly characterizes what is proper to God: 'Nothing is impossible with God (*ouk adunatēsei para tou Theou pan rēma*)' (Luke 1: 37, citing Gen. 18: 14; see Marion 2010a).

The work of a Christology, if the term can have a truly legitimate (that is to say non-tautological) meaning, would first consist in considering the different types of phenomena in each of the manifestations of Jesus related in the New Testament texts. Thus, before trying to measure the degree of authenticity of the *logia* and accounts, we could begin by locating their modes of phenomenality, distinguishing objective from saturated phenomena, and among the latter, distinguishing which ones pertain to the event, the idol, the flesh, or the icon; then which ones combine several of these types of saturation, which ones mobilize all of them, upon what concepts and meanings the intuitive saturation is exerted in each case, etc. Indeed, discussions of the comparative authenticity of such and such a *logion*, of the age of such or such a pericope, of the sincerity of such and such a textual tradition or testimony of a community or group, presuppose that we already know what this authenticity, this sincerity, this age, this reality itself, in each case, can mean. Yet we can only reach such objective certitude about what can, or even must, be constituted as an object; there would be no sense in requiring the same type of certitude of a saturated phenomenon (of whatever degree or type), which,

by definition, not only cannot, but must not, be constituted in an object, because to the contrary it comes as an event, which provokes its witness and constitutes her from itself. In this way, the witness's faith suits the saturated phenomenon exactly as objectivity suits the phenomenon constituted in an object. Without these phenomenological distinctions, exegesis does not even know what types or degrees of certitude, authenticity, or historicity it is possible or even licit to expect from these very particular and exceptional phenomena that the biblical writings relate. Without these distinctions, exegesis will no longer even know exactly what body of meaning it seeks in the letter of the texts.

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The demand of such a phenomenological consideration of revelation is thus imposed by the phenomenality, or more exactly by the obviously phenomenal character, of the event of the Christ and the modes of his manifestation as the Son of God. But this demand is also imposed because the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ declares itself as a matter of phenomenality; very precisely, of phenomenization. Not only does revelation phenomenize itself because it manifests itself, but it manifests itself by making all things visible. It cannot phenomenize itself without phenomenizing everything else. Just as phenomenology, as a philosophical discipline, recognizes as a 'principle of all principles' that everything that appears must be able to be received as a phenomenon by rights, the theologian also must admit that Revelation causes, in the flash of its own light, the coming to light of all things, and thus also of what, before the light of revelation, was hidden in darkness or retreat. Revelation deploys what we might call a principle of manifestation, following which, when the light of divine glory, of *mustêrion*, is manifested, everything that can appear, even if it does not want to, must also become manifest.

Moreover, the Synoptics formulate this demand almost with the rigour of a principle: 'There is nothing hidden that will not become manifest (*ou gar estin krupton ho ou phaneron gênêsetai*), nothing secret (*apokrupton*) that will not come to light (*eis phaneron elthê*)' (Matt. 10: 26). 'For there is nothing hidden that must not be manifested (*ou gar estinti kruptonean me ina phanerôthê*). Nothing has become hidden, except to come to light (*elthê eis phaneron*)' (Mark 4: 22). 'There is nothing hidden that will not become manifest (*ou gar estin krupton ho ou phaneron gênêsetai*), nothing secret (*apokrupton*) that must not be known and come to light (*eis phaneron elthê*)' (Luke 8: 17). This manifestation of all things is not so to speak a collateral effect of the manifestation of God in and as Jesus Christ, but is rather his direct and proper work: 'Therefore do not judge before the time (*pro kairou*) when the Lord comes: for it is he who will illuminate the secrets of the dark and will show the intentions of hearts' (1 Cor. 3: 5). The light which is on all things is defined in Greek terms as truth, or more exactly as discover (*a-lêtheia*), the coming out of its covering of what was covered, but also as the coming of discovery itself. It may be that theology also needs to define the equivalent of a conception of truth and to define it in theological terms—but on the condition of a radically revised phenomenology. It would then still be a matter of truth as discovery, but understood and received as *apocalypse*, indissolubly 'apocalypse of the mystery (*apokalupsis tês mustêriou*)' (Rom. 16: 25) and 'apocalypse of God's judgement (*apokalupsis diakrisias*

tou theou)' (Rom. 2: 5; see Vioulac 2014). God's judgement makes manifest all that hides and obscures itself voluntarily in the heart of the world. The manifestation of the mystery of God manifests that of which the Word accomplishes 'exegesis (*exégèsato*)' (John 1: 18), namely, his dwelling with the Father in the Spirit. The Christ incarnates this exegesis in person. Also, because he knows (by being it) what God is, he alone was able to 'interpret (perform hermeneutics—*diêrmeneusen*) of the scriptures by relating them to himself beginning with Moses and all the prophets' (Luke 24: 27)—that is to say, by interpreting the saturating intuition of the resurrection—inconceivable by our concepts—from concepts given by God. These concepts and his intuitive visibility end up coinciding in a 'sign' of the breaking of the bread. And, there where he gives himself in person, the Christ appears in a phenomenon by rights. This exegesis and hermeneutics, always new and always yet to be accomplished, can only happen in an apocalypse, which will resolutely take into view the phenomenality of revelation.

In this sense, the phenomenologist waits for the theologian, in opening his eyes to biblical phenomenality according to his own independent procedures and the requirements that only can and must place/fix/hold him in the faith of the Church, to in turn open to the phenomenologist spaces that he can barely see. Phenomenology, by allowing itself to be reformed by theology, and theology, by learning from phenomenology to better see what gives itself, could thus, *perhaps*, redefine the mystical. Or rather, as Mallarmé defined it 'mystery, which we can know only by doing it' (Mallarmé 1998: 557 and 964).

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CHAPTER 24

THE TRINITY

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INTRODUCTION

IN the fourth book of his first theological synthesis Thomas Aquinas had asked whether we should pray to any of the Trinitarian Persons, or rather to God as such (IV *Sent.* d. 15, q. 4, a. 5; Mortensen 2017: 180–1). In *quaestiuncula* 3 he replies that while the entire Godhead is the source of our beatitude, there is nonetheless a Trinitarian dynamic at work in our act of praying: ‘a certain return (*reductio*) is made from the other Persons back to the Father . . . And this is the reason why Christ, referring us to the Father as to a principle not from a principle, taught us to direct our prayer to the Father through the Son.’ Similarly, it is through the Gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, that we can address the Father through Christ. It is therefore, Aquinas suggests, more appropriate (*magis competit*) to ask *for* the Holy Spirit than to ask something *from* the Holy Spirit. These remarks, no matter how brief, suggest that prayer can become a participation in the Trinitarian dynamics. Our prayer reflects a kind of return (*reductio*): in receiving the Holy Spirit we return through the Son to the Father, ‘the principle not from a principle’. This *reductio* mirrors the operation of the Trinity in the history of salvation: the Son, through the incarnation, brings us back to the Father, while the Holy Spirit, the one who is given to us in prayer, assists us in discerning the saving mystery of Christ.

These remarks do not apply merely to the act of prayer but to the entire Christian life: through the Holy Spirit and the gift of the sacraments (especially baptism and eucharist) we become incorporated into the Body of Christ, through which we return to the Father. Through the Holy Spirit we can fathom the mystery of the incarnate Word who himself is the way towards the Father (John 14: 6). From this angle it can be argued that engaging in theological activity (at least when done in a sapiential vein) presupposes a participation in a Trinitarian dynamic. This, then, is the theme of this contribution: how does participation in the life of the Trinity (a theme usually associated with spirituality) relate to our theological endeavours (and development and understanding of Trinitarian doctrine in particular), and vice versa?

From a pre-modern perspective, a discussion of the relation between mystical theology (or 'Christian spirituality', in more modern parlance) and the doctrine of the Trinity may at first appear a somewhat puzzling, if not futile, exercise. At face value, the question only seems to make sense if one already assumes that Christian spirituality and theology of the Trinity are separate disciplines—one usually characterized as experiential and the other as more theoretical or intellectual—which can then engage with one another. Hence, the question only seems to acquire any relevance after c.1300, when theology and Christian spirituality (or mysticism) become separated from one another, and few theologians are saints, and saints are no longer theologians (von Balthasar 2011: 181–6). The way the question is raised hints therefore at a typically modern set of presuppositions, many of which are rather questionable (such as, for instance, the assumption that doctrinal framework and 'experience' are separate).

In the last couple of decades there have been widespread calls for a re-engagement of theology and Christian spirituality (McIntosh 1998). In light of the modern origins of the separation of theology and spirituality pre-modern sources may offer us a rich alternative resource for re-establishing this connection, and in what follows we will examine a number of them.

In our view, Christian spirituality is inherently theological, or should be, as the traditional name ('mystical theology') suggests. The same point can be made from a hermeneutical point of view. Paraphrasing Gadamer (Gadamer 2013: 318–50), according to whom understanding that occurs in the interpretive process always inevitably implies application, we can argue that unless we can discern the significance of our theology of the Trinity for the way we live our Christian life we have not begun to understand it in the first place (insofar, admittedly, as we can understand it at all in this life). Perhaps more controversially, we also need to probe to what extent the lived reality of our Christian existence may shape our interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity. This may appear somewhat problematic at first because, so it could be argued, only the scriptural witness should inform the doctrine of the Trinity; or at most, the scriptural witness interpreted through the lens of the tradition. This tradition, however, is itself shaped by theologians whose lives, ideally, are shaped by a lived experience and participation in the life of the Trinity to which their writings (mystical and theological) bear witness. It is these living accounts (embedded within a particular historical context) that may enrich our theologies of the Trinity, as we hope to illustrate in this chapter.

In the first part we will examine how theological activity is predicated on a participation in the life of the Trinity: there is no vision without participation. We will do so by examining in particular the mystical theology of the Trinity of St Bonaventure who has bequeathed us a powerful account of how an engagement with theology without participation in the life of the Trinity is doomed to failure.

In the second part of this chapter we will give an example of how mystical theology may offer a fruitful resource for reconceiving of the mystery of the Trinity itself: participation shapes vision. Here we will mainly look at the writings of Hadewijch and especially Jan van Ruusbroec. Their writings reveal how their experience of a Christian life patterned along a Trinitarian rhythm informs their theology of the Trinity, which offers

a valuable enrichment of the theological tradition. Hence, while we hope to illustrate the way mystical theology and theology of the Trinity have enriched one another we also will be developing a more original systematic argument. If we want to adhere to Rahner's insight that the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity we are faced with a theological puzzle known as the issue of 'Trinitarian inversion': in the immanent Trinity the procession of the Holy Spirit occurs 'after' the generation of the Son (at least in the Latin account—cf. the *Filioque*) but in the economy of salvation the mission of the Holy Spirit precedes that of the mission of the Son (cf. the Annunciation and conception of Christ cf. Matt, 1: 18; Luke 1: 35). Here, it seems to us, at least some mystical theologians have made an important contribution that may go some way in resolving an important theological anomaly.

TRINITY, PARTICIPATION AND VISION

In this section we will give a detailed outline of the mystical theology of the Trinity of Bonaventure. We can begin to know and love God as Trinity only by sharing in the Trinity: vision of the Trinity is impossible without participation. Bonaventure was hereby expressing and developing an idea which had already been aired by other medieval authors (Van Nieuwenhove 2012). William of St Thierry, for instance, had argued that unless we have faith and love, which is an indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us, and unless we participate in the Holy Spirit, who is himself the bond of knowledge and love between Father and Son, we will not be able to know and love the triune God. We can only know and love God with a love and knowledge that have been bestowed on us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Holy Spirit is the bond of both knowledge and love explains why William insists that both intellect and love are necessary in our union with God. For William, therefore, knowledge and love mutually inhere one another. William thus proves faithful to the biblical tradition in which knowledge and love are often used interchangeably (cf. Gen. 4: 1: *Adam vero cognovit uxorem suam*). In other words, love is its own kind of knowledge. As William writes in his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, no. 76 (Hart 1970: 64): 'love of God itself is knowledge of him; unless he is loved, he is not known, and unless he is known, he is not loved'. God is known only insofar as he is loved through the Holy Spirit. The intimate union or perichoresis of intellect and love reflects the mutual indwelling of the divine Persons within the Trinity.

William developed this argument to refute Peter Abelard's alleged rationalism (and his claim that pagan philosophers had knowledge of the triune God). In passing it is worth recalling that in the twentieth century Karl Barth was to develop an analogous argument against the anthropological turn taken in modern theology (Schleiermacher). Karl Barth developed a highly original theology of the Trinity that is deeply embedded in the revelatory event itself (Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove 2011: 155–65). As is well-known, Barth promotes a prayerful way of doing theology, displaying a distinct

impatience with non-theocentric and non-theological approaches that bracket out the key presuppositions of the Christian faith. According to Barth, we cannot understand the Bible by relying on our own strength. It is the gift of faith which assists us in understanding revelation, and this revelation is ultimately the Word of God, to which the scriptures testify. For our purposes the most striking aspect of Barth's proposal is his insight that the biblical concept of revelation itself is the root of the doctrine of the Trinity (Barth 2004: 334). Just as we never encounter revelation as such but only insofar as it is expressed in scriptures and proclamation, so too we do not encounter God the Father directly but only through the Son and the Holy Spirit (Barth 2004: 121). God, as Revealer, expresses himself in his act of revelation, which impacts the hearers (what Barth calls 'Revealedness'). Barth associates the Revealer with the Father, Revelation with the Son, and Revealedness with the Holy Spirit. Just as there is a source of revelation that is distinct from his revelation, so too there is an inner differentiation within God as Father and Son. Again, the Holy Spirit is the self-impartation of God, just as revealedness refers to the effect of the act of revelation upon us. The Father is the Speaker, the Son is the Word of the Speaker, and the Holy Spirit is the Meaning (Barth 2004: 363–4).

Barth's account is striking in that his theology of the Trinity is intimately linked with the event of revelation itself, in terms of Revealer (the Father), Revelation (the Son), and Revealedness (the Holy Spirit). A crucial implication of Barth's account is that the Holy Spirit is the Person who unlocks the meaning of the Word for us. It is the triune God as revealed in the Word who is the condition of possibility of our knowing God. We relate to revelation in faith which is not a human capacity but a gift from God. As William pointed to our need to participate in the life of the Holy Spirit to begin to make sense of the mysteries of faith in distinct opposition to the rationalism of Peter Abelard, so too Barth draws our attention to the fact that we cannot approach God's Revelation without sharing in the Revealedness (the Holy Spirit and his gift of faith) in direct opposition to the anthropological turn inaugurated by the founder of modern theology, F. Schleiermacher. Hence, for Barth, too, we cannot come to know the triune God without participation in the life of the Trinity. This brief excursus on Barth illustrates the contemporary and critical relevance of participatory approaches for our construal of theological activity. As mentioned earlier, few theologians in the tradition of the West have developed this idea as powerfully as St Bonaventure, whose mystical theology of the Trinity we now outline in greater detail.

Theologia, Bonaventure maintains, has as its goal the soul's mystical union with God. For this reason, it is never a purely speculative or rational exercise; nor can it be confined to an exclusively academic setting. Instead, theology, as *sapientia perfecta*, is both a speculative and a practical discipline; one rooted in the lived experience of faith and the revealed doctrines of scripture. As such, whilst theology may be the pinnacle of intellectual enquiry, it is nonetheless an essentially transient, translucent enterprise. It exists not for itself, but to bring the soul into contact with God. As such, in its conventional forms of intellectual and spiritual endeavour, theology should always stand ready to give way to a higher, super-imposed non-rational mode of knowing and loving: namely,

the 'experiential' knowledge of God which comes through mystical union with him (Bonaventure, *De Scientia Christi* 7.21; Hayes 2005: 196).

Theology according to Bonaventure is thus never an end in itself but a pathway to holiness. It can be known only through love and prayerful adoration. To engage properly in theology a person does not primarily require books and learning but love and holiness. For without holiness 'a man cannot be wise' (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 2.6; de Vinck 1970: 24). At its height, theology thus involves a transcendence of the intellect, whereby it 'passes over with the crucified Christ' into the 'super-essential radiance of the divine darkness' (Bonaventure, *Itin.* 7.5–6; Hayes 2002: 139). *Theologia* is thus at heart a fundamentally mystical exercise. It begins with prayer, not study:

Now if you ask how all these things are to come about, ask grace not doctrine; desire, not intellect; the groaning of prayer and not studious reading; the Spouse, not the master; God, not a human being; darkness not clarity; not light but the fire that inflames totally and carries one into God through spiritual fervour and with the most burning affections. (Bonaventure, *Itin.* 7.6; Hayes 2002: 139)

For Bonaventure, this mystical dimension of theology finds its fullest expression in relation to the Trinity. This is not simply because mystical theology strives after the 'experiential' knowledge of God as he is in himself—i.e. as Trinity; but because mystical theology itself is critical to all Trinitarian speculation. Without mystical theology there can be no sound Trinitarian speculation. For when we seek to know God as he is in his inner Trinitarian self and not just as he is known in his created effects, all conventional forms of theological dialogue fail. The ineffable mystery par excellence, God's inner life, must therefore be approached through love and spiritual desire. For 'it is not the intellect that can go in here but the heart' (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 2.32; de Vinck 1970: 39).

However, for Bonaventure mystical union with God is not simply the 'end' or 'final word' in Trinitarian theology; nor ought it to be separated from, or opposed to, those 'lower' forms of Trinitarian speculation which employ reason and philosophy—i.e. traditional academic Trinitarian theology. Instead, it should be placed at the very heart of such Trinitarian dialogue. According to Bonaventure, it is the mystical union with God as Trinity which grounds and continually stands at the heart of the lower, more conventional forms of Trinitarian speculation. Thus, whilst at one level union with God as Trinity may be the climax of Trinitarian speculation, it is, paradoxically, at another level, the very beginning of all true 'knowledge' of the Trinity. As such, whilst Trinitarian speculation, like theology as a whole, may use the tools of the speculative sciences, it is nonetheless a fundamentally practical, spiritual exercise. As such in seeking to know the Trinity Bonaventure counsels love not knowledge, *affectus* not *scientia*. As he writes in the Prologue §4 to the *Itinerarium* (Hayes 2002: 39): 'Do not think that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without admiration, industry without piety, knowledge without charity, intelligence without humility, study without divine grace.'

Crucially, the significance of mystical union with God is not restricted to speculation about God's inner Trinitarian life. It also has implications for the study of God's

self-revelation as Trinity within creation and salvation. Mystical theology for Bonaventure is thus key to understanding what, in modern parlance, is called the 'economic' Trinity. Subsequently, like our desire to know God's inner Trinitarian self, theological contemplation of his Trinitarian effects within creation can never be confined solely to the intellect. Instead, it belongs most properly within the realm of mystical contemplation and the silent yearnings of the heart. For it is only these which give true 'knowledge' of the Trinity's vestiges in creation.

For Bonaventure, the mutually enriching relationship between Trinitarian speculation and mystical union is thus a critical one; indeed, it is the lens through which his Trinitarian thought in its entirety is to be viewed and measured. He expresses this through his own distinctive interpretation of the principle of *egressus* and *regressus*; namely, his threefold metaphysic of emanation, exemplarism, and consummation (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 1.17; de Vinck 1970:10). For Bonaventure, all creation proceeds from, shows forth, and is ordered to, return to the triune God who made it. Each area of this Trinitarian metaphysics is underpinned, and critically determined, by Bonaventure's mystical outlook. Moreover, each serves to highlight the primacy which Bonaventure attributes to mystical union in shaping his Trinitarian thought. To fully appreciate the centrality that mystical theology occupies in Bonaventure's thought we need to consider in turn his metaphysics of emanation, exemplarism, and consummation. We will treat of emanation first.

Drawing on the mystical Trinitarian speculation of Pseudo-Dionysius and Richard of St Victor, Bonaventure makes clear that it is in God's inner life as Trinity that the very fount, measure, and pattern of all truth and love is to be found. It is the notion of God as the highest self-diffusive good which underpins the entire life of the Trinity. For Bonaventure, the good always seeks to give itself to the other: *bonum dicitur diffusivum sui* (Bonaventure, *Itin.* 6.2; Hayes 2002: 122). Given the fact that God is the highest good—indeed, God's essence, Bonaventure tells us, *is* the good—his love must therefore be supremely diffusive.

For Bonaventure, the Father is the fount principle of all goodness and the well-spring from which the Son and the Holy Spirit flow. The infinite depths of the Father's love and goodness are such that they are inexhaustible and perfectly self-diffusive. To be properly fulfilled his goodness must be communicated to another Person within the Godhead itself: one capable of receiving such an infinite gift of love and mirroring it back to the Father. As such, there must be a second Person within the Trinity, a Person equal in divinity and dignity to the Father. This, Bonaventure tells us, is the Son whom the Father's goodness has generated from eternity.

Because the Son is the perfect image of the Father, he receives not only the totality of the Father's goodness, but also the capacity to generate and sustain an emanation of love within the Godhead. As such, the Son must in conjunction with the Father generate a Person distinct from both of them; for if the Son did not have the capacity to generate a Person as the Father does he would not be a true image of him. Thus, in order for the love between the Father and the Son to reach its maximum self-diffusion, together they must generate a Person who is the shared object of their love; this of course is the Holy Spirit. Thus, for Bonaventure, the Holy Spirit is not only the witness to the superabundant love

between the Father and the Son; he is the one who searches out, and flows from, the very depths of their being. The Holy Spirit is both the shared object of the love of the Father and Son as well as the product and manifestation of this freely given love. As such, the Spirit proceeds not *per modum naturae* like the Son; instead, he is generated *per modum voluntatis* (Bonaventure, I *Sent.*, d. 6, a. un., q. 2, resp.; 1882: 127–8).

The Trinity's inner life is thus for Bonaventure a super-abundant loving union. Moreover, it is from this inexhaustible mystery of love that creation itself proceeds and finds its continued source of existence. This brings us to our second topic of discussion, exemplarism, which can only be properly discerned if we adopt in faith and love a Trinitarian perspective. As the Father's eternal Word, the Son is not only the fullest expression of his goodness and love, but the recipient and manifestation of all that which the Father knows, both with respect to the infinity of the Godhead itself and the finite natural order (Bonaventure, III *Sent.*, d. 14, a. 2, q. 3, resp.; 1887: 314–16). The Son is thus the primal Word—the divine 'archetype'—of creation itself. All creatures are a reflection and imperfect imitation of their original idea within the Son. More importantly, as a window into the divine mind, each creature offers an opportunity for mystical communion with God. Great or small, the creature acts as a sacramental manifestation—a mystical word—of the divine goodness and its centrality within the Trinity's inner relations of love. To this extent, creation itself is thus an echo of the infinite Word which the Father originally spoke through the generation of the Son.

Whilst it may be the Son whom all creatures look to as their original efficient, formal, and final cause, Bonaventure insists the exemplary likeness creatures possess is not restricted to reflecting the Person of the Word. Instead, each creature reflects the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator in differing degrees. Creation is thus like a book in which something of God's inner Trinitarian life can be discovered. Within this book each creature is either a vestige, image, or similitude of its Trinitarian author (Bonaventure, *Brevil.* 2.12; 1891: 230). All creatures possess the nature of a vestige because they bear the indelible mark of their divine architect. However, vestige is most appropriately applied to those creatures which are most distant from God's likeness—i.e. inanimate and purely sensual creatures. By contrast, creatures endowed with a higher spiritual nature, and thus closer to God—i.e. human beings—possess the quality of an image, for in them the Trinitarian stamp shines more clearly. Finally, there are those creatures which possess the highest possible likeness to the Trinity and are said to be a similitude of God. These offer the clearest testimony to God's Trinitarian nature. They are the saints, prophets, and mystics; however, the quality of similitude is also to be found in varying degrees in ordinary Christians who experience union with God through prayer and love.

At its most basic level therefore for Bonaventure creation is like a stained-glass window, which, possessed of its own likeness to the Trinity, allows the light of God's inner Trinitarian self to shine continually. Each creature according to its proximity to God offers a glimpse into his inner life and is a means for mystical union with him. However, as touched on earlier, given the primacy of *affectus* over *scientia*, our ability to read the Trinitarian story narrated within creation is determined not by our intellectual acuteness but by the degree to which we are taken up into the process of God's self-revelation.

The capacity to read creation correctly in Bonaventure's judgement is thus the privilege of the contemplative and not the philosopher, 'for Christ goes away', he remarks, when the soul tries to read creation through purely 'intellectual eyes' (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 2.32; de Vinck 1970: 39). The ability to read the book of nature correctly is thus dictated by the degree to which we are conformed to God, i.e. made *deiform*.

The soul's natural likeness to the Trinity is found in its three powers of memory, intellect, and will. However, on account of sin, this Trinitarian likeness has become darkened, disabling the soul to read creation correctly. As such, to recover its original dignity, and achieve its vocation of being rendered a similitude of the Trinity, the soul requires an internal reordering and illumination of its faculties. This, Bonaventure maintains, is achieved through the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Grounded in prayer and mystical union, these reorder the soul's faculties in such a way that it is able to see the mystical meaning which stands behind creation. The indwelling of faith, hope, and love—rather than memory, intellect, and will as such—constitute the true likeness of the Trinity found in those who are a perfect similitude of God.

The nature of a similitude was naturally found in human beings prior to the Fall. Humanity was originally created in a state of perfection, whereby, in Adam, it could reason its way unaided to a knowledge of the Trinity through the contemplation of his created vestiges. With the Fall, however, this innate rectitude was lost and the book of creation rendered illegible. This, Bonaventure tells us, is because the soul lost not only its innate light of intellectual certainty, but because its affective powers also became disordered. Instead of loving the Creator and his reflections in the natural order, the soul—driven by a disordered love for sensory knowledge—hungered after a purely naturalistic understanding of reality. As such, it became blind to the Trinitarian light which shines through creation; the soul forgot, in other words, how to read the world mystically (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 2.19–32; de Vinck 1970: 31–8).

For this reason, God provided another 'book'—scripture—to restore something of the soul's original rectitude and allow it to read creation aright: 'hence sacred Scripture sheds light on all things and retraces them all back to God, thus restoring the original state of creatures' (*Hex.* 13.13; de Vinck 1970: 191). However, as with the book of nature, that of scripture—even though it contains an explicit testimony to the Trinity—cannot be read properly without mystical insight. As with creation, beyond the scripture's literal word there stands a hidden spiritual meaning that eludes purely rational enquiry. Scripture—like the natural world—must therefore be read mystically in order to be correctly understood.

As suggested, for Bonaventure, our mind's capacity to know something, particularly God's tri-unity, is determined by the purity of our love; which of course is, in turn, dependent upon our status of grace. Thus, for Bonaventure love and knowledge are co-dependent, with the former illuminating the horizon of the latter. The further we participate in God's grace, and the further we abandon ourselves to mystical union within him, the greater our ability to understand both him and creation. When our affective potency goes astray—i.e. when we fail in charity—so also does our intellectual power; ignorance and error are thus as much a product of disordered affections as they are

intellectual weakness or ill-advised study. Thus, when Bonaventure claims the Christian possesses a deeper understanding of God and his created vestiges than the unaided philosopher—i.e. because she knows God as Trinity—this is not simply because she has access to a higher intellectual truth. The reception of revelation, Bonaventure insists, is never purely intellectual but is always both intellectual *and* affective—i.e. it is always mystical. The Christian's ability to read creation aright is grounded within the gift of charity which union with God brings. What prevent the philosophers from discovering the Trinity and its reflections within the natural order are the limitations of their hearts as much as those of their intellects. Because they lack the 'experiential wisdom' which mystical union brings they fail to evaluate God and creation properly. This brings us to the third key topic, namely consummation.

Bonaventure's understanding of mystical theology's role in creation's consummation is framed within his dynamic, eschatologically driven reading of God's self-revelation as Trinity. Whilst he rejects Joachim of Fiore's (1135–1202) famous threefold Trinitarian model of history, Bonaventure's appropriation of the Calabrian Abbot's notion of history as progressing towards a final age of mystical illumination is well known (Ratzinger 1971: 104–8). For Bonaventure, as for Joachim, history culminates in a final age of earthly beatitude. During this final age of peace, the fullness of God's self-revelation as Trinity will reach its climax through the universal outpouring of perfect mystical union; and humanity, being rendered a perfect similitude of the Trinity, will stand in the closest proximity to God as it waits to enter into the heavenly kingdom. Mystical union with the Trinity is thus seen to be the very goal of creation itself; one which creation and the entire movement of space and time continually strive after.

Revelation, for Bonaventure, and subsequently our capacity to read creation as a mystical window into God's inner Trinitarian life, is thus a dynamic, ongoing affair; one which—in the current age at least—has yet to reach its fulfilment. Whilst God fully revealed himself as Trinity in Christ, our capacity to understand and participate in this revelation, Bonaventure maintains, is constantly being enriched. As such, at one level, it is appropriate to say God's self-revelation as Trinity is an ongoing, ever-dynamic process: God is *still* revealing himself as Trinity. To this extent, our current ways of knowing the Trinity, both speculative and mystical, are incomplete and transient. Consequently, our ability to perceive creation as a vestige, image, and similitude of the Trinity is neither static nor fully realized; nor, as such, is it devoid of eschatological significance. Instead, it is to be seen against the background of the gradually unfolding narrative of God's self-revelation as Trinity and creation's movement towards a final age of spiritual illumination.

It is at this point that theology in Bonaventure's sense of the word becomes central to creation's consummation. The theologian has a special, indeed central, role to play in leading creation to its ultimate end. This is so, because her capacity to read the world as a vestige, image, and similitude of the Trinity allows her to 'reorder' it and thereby help restore something of its original relationship with God. Through her mystical reading of creatures, and the insight which this gives her into the divine self, the theologian inchoately effects, and participates in, the return of creation back to its exemplar, thereby allowing it to re-enter the Trinity. Through doing so, she brings creation's final mystical

consummation a little closer. Thus, for Bonaventure, the theologian's work is crucial not only to the world's 'right ordering', but it has a distinctly eschatological, perhaps even salvific, character.

The fact that the entire creation possesses hidden Trinitarian depths leads Bonaventure to conclude that all aspects of human society must also be retraced back to the Trinity. As such, each of the 'sciences'—from metaphysics and philosophy, to the simple mechanical arts of the uneducated laity: weaving, hunting, and domestic life, etc.—must also be viewed in a Trinitarian light (Bonaventure, *De Reductione* 11ff.; 1891: 322–3). Without the proper ordering of these 'natural sciences' creation can never be properly consummated. For even in these 'lower' activities vestiges of the Trinity are to be found. As such, whilst the task of retracing creatures back to God is the special vocation of the theologian, Bonaventure insists that those who practise these 'lower sciences', namely the uneducated laity, must also be involved in retracing them back to the Trinity. Since such a task requires neither books nor learning but love and prayer it can be carried out by the educated and uneducated alike; one need only think of St Francis who, although theologically 'illiterate', 'read' creation properly because of his mystical union with God. All Christians are therefore called to participate in the mystical harvest of creation.

Beyond aiding this contemporary process of *reductio*, Bonaventure maintains there is one final role for mystical theology in creation's consummation, one which will see it come into its own as the supreme way of knowing the Trinity. This will be achieved through the universal spiritual enlightenment of the final age of peace. During this last age, God's self-disclosure as Trinity in the form of mystical union will be realized in full. Here the transcendence of the intellect experienced by the mystic in the present era will reach fulfilment and the Trinity shall be known solely through mystical adoration. 'And then', Bonaventure tells us, 'there will be peace'—*et tunc pax erit* (Bonaventure, *Hex.* 16.30; de Vinck 1970: 250). For the world itself, like all good Trinitarian speculation, will fall into silence and mystical adoration. Bonaventure therefore counsels: 'Let us stop speaking, and let us pray to the Lord that we may be granted the experience of that about which we have spoken' (Bonaventure, *De Scientia Christi* 7.21; Hayes 2005: 196).

In summary, for Bonaventure theology is the science which leads not just to the knowledge of God, but the lived experience of God as he is in himself—i.e. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, all theology (both that carried out in a strictly academic setting and that practised in everyday Christian life through prayer) is both distinctly mystical and radically Trinitarian. Indeed, as we saw, for Bonaventure mystical theology and Trinitarian speculation are very much intertwined. In his works they enjoy a unique and mutually enriching relationship in which mystical theology, as Bonaventure's primary source of theological reflection, not only shapes the content of his Trinitarian speculation but serves as its crowning achievement and final utterance. Bonaventure's Trinitarian theology is thus not only distinctly mystical but it accords mystical theology itself a unique role in explaining God's inner Trinitarian life. It assists us in discerning, in turn, how the Trinity is operative and manifested within the economy of creation and salvation. For Bonaventure, therefore, all Trinitarian speculation is ultimately mystical theology.

We now turn to two authors whose mystical theology offers us an exciting manner of reconceiving the mystery of the Trinitarian God in light of their lived Christian experience. If, for Bonaventure, vision is impossible without participation or union, for Ruusbroec participation partly shapes how he conceives of the doctrine of the Trinity itself—and his account has at least one distinct advantage over more ‘traditional’ accounts.

THE PROBLEM OF TRINITARIAN INVERSION: HADEWIJCH AND RUUSBROEC

Rahner’s axiom that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa can best be interpreted in traditional terms, that is: the historical missions reveal the eternal processions (i.e. the generation of the Word and the procession of the Holy Spirit) which in turn shape creation and salvation (Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove 2011: 165–7). As was explained in Chapter 20, the historical missions, however, do not solely refer to the incarnation and the descending of the Holy Spirit but also include the invisible missions, that is, the indwelling of the Word and the Holy Spirit in the soul and in the community of the believers. This indwelling through faith and love (and the gifts of the Holy Spirit) enables us to begin to discern the saving significance of the temporal missions of the Son (incarnation) and the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) and how they contribute to our deification.

Rahner’s axiom fulfils an important heuristic function, namely to prevent our theology of the Trinity from becoming an exercise in abstract speculation without any reference to the history of salvation. Thus, our theological speculation on the immanent Trinity should always be based on the revelation of the Trinity in the history of salvation. As flagged earlier, here we are faced with a serious difficulty. There is a temporal priority of the Holy Spirit over the Son in several instances: at the Annunciation of Mary, and at the conception, baptism, and the ministry of Christ, the Holy Spirit precedes the Word. Moreover, in the process of discerning the mystery of salvation, there is a priority of the Holy Spirit over the Word: the scriptures testify that it is the Gift of the Holy Spirit who enables us to recognize Christ as the Son of God through whom we come to the Father. Similarly, it is the Spirit of truth who witnesses to Christ (John 14: 25; 15: 26), and it is only when the apostles receive the Holy Spirit that they begin to discern the salvation that Christ effected as witnessed and prophesied by the Old Testament. There occurs, therefore, in the language of Hans Urs von Balthasar (2005: 35; 1992: 183ff.) ‘a Trinitarian inversion’ whereby the Christological centre of the economy of salvation is framed ‘by a pneumatology that precedes and succeeds it’. For von Balthasar this anomaly does not impact on his understanding of the immanent Trinity where the generation of the Son precedes the procession of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, when critiquing the Latin tradition of the *Filioque* John Zizioulas has seized upon this issue to question the

Latin notion of *Filioque*, observing that, ‘if one looks at the Economy in order to arrive at *Theologia* [i.e. speculation about the immanent Trinity], one begins with the Holy Spirit, then passes through the Son, and finally reaches the Father’ (Zizioulas 2006: 188). In summary, the historical missions of the Holy Spirit and the Son (the economic Trinity) appear at least in terms of temporal succession at variance with the way Latin theology has construed the sequence of processions within the immanent Trinity, where the Son’s generation precedes that of the Holy Spirit.

This problem affects the two major models of the Trinity prevalent in the Latin tradition. These models have already been discussed in Chapter 20, and a brief recapitulation will therefore suffice. Richard of St Victor’s interpersonal model, also adopted by St Bonaventure, considers the Trinitarian God in terms of a tri-personal community of shared Love. Love wants to share itself; but it is only when love is reciprocated that it becomes more perfect and enjoyable. Love between two persons only, however, is not quite perfect, for it is always in danger of remaining somewhat self-enclosed and exclusivist, which is at odds with the true nature of shared or communal love (Richard of St Victor, *De Trin.* 3.20; Coolman and Coulter 2010: 263–4). Therefore, love attains its perfection when it finds its ultimate expression in a co-beloved (*condilectus*), one who is loved by the two lovers as the manifestation of their mutual love. Richard argues (Richard of St Victor, *De Trin.* 3.11; Coolman and Coulter 2010: 256) that ‘in mutual and very ardent love nothing is rarer and more excellent than your desire for the person, whom you supremely love and who supremely loves you, to love equally another person. And so, the proof of perfected charity is the votive communion of the love that was bestowed to oneself.’ As mentioned in Chapter 20, Richard then distinguishes the divine Persons in terms of this analysis of Love: the Father bestows his Love on the other two Persons; the Son receives this Love, and passes it on to the Holy Spirit who receives the Love of the Father and the Son. The Father is characterized as Love freely given (*amor gratuitus*) because he freely bestows his love on the other Persons from whom he has not received anything. The Holy Spirit is Love owed (*amor debitus*) as the Holy Spirit returns to the Father who freely bestowed his love nothing but love. The Son is characterized as Love that is a combination of both because he freely receives love from the Father and freely bestows it on the Holy Spirit (Richard of St Victor, *De Trin.* 5.16; Coolman and Coulter 2010: 309–10). In this way, then, Richard can do justice to the Johannine insight that God is love, and yet distinguish in a sophisticated manner the three Persons from one another as Love freely bestowed, Love freely received and bestowed, and Love freely received. The interpersonal model proved highly popular in the twentieth century. It was, for instance, adopted by Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff, who exploit its communitarian potential to critique injustice and inequality in society and the Church.

The so-called intrapersonal model, usually associated with Augustine and Aquinas has also already been discussed in Chapter 20. It may suffice to recall how it hinges on the operation of the intellect (the generation of the Word) and the operation of the will or love (the procession of the Holy Spirit). Hence, instead of focusing on the three divine Persons the intrapersonal model centres on the two divine processions.

In both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal model the procession of the Holy Spirit is the final and climactic moment within the Trinity. In light of St Augustine's doctrine of *Filioque* the Holy Spirit is the Gift of the mutual love of Father and Son. As Aquinas makes clear, the Holy Spirit proceeds as Love, which 'has the nature of a first gift through which all free gifts are given' (Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2; 1981: 193). Again, the name 'Spirit' expresses 'a certain vital movement and impulse' as it expresses the ecstatic moment of the love of Father and Son (Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 27, a. 4; 1981: 150). Chapter 20 signalled that it is not clear how Richard can account for the invisible mission of the Son, and that, therefore, the intrapersonal model seemed to have a distinct advantage on that score. However, both models face the problem of the discrepancy between an immanent account of the Holy Spirit as the *final* moment of the intra-Trinitarian dynamics, on the one hand, and an economic account where the Holy Spirit *precedes* the mission of the Son, and is pivotal in our *return* to God, on the other hand.

It is here that one vein of mystical theology may prove useful. In the mystical theology of Jan van Ruusbroec the notion of *regyratio* occupies a central role in the Trinitarian dynamics. It is fair to say that Ruusbroec has put forward one of the most dynamic theologies of the Trinity in the Latin West. Before we discuss his theology of the Trinity, and how it can address the problem of Trinitarian inversion, we would like to examine the mystical theology of one of his predecessors, Hadewijch, a *mulier religiosa*, who has left us an intriguing oeuvre, also written in Middle Dutch, of letters, visions, and poems. In her writings Hadewijch hints at the notion of *regyratio* that Ruusbroec was to put at the very heart of his theological outlook. Hadewijch outlines in a striking manner how the Christian life is shaped by a Trinitarian dynamic; but it seems equally clear that her own lived spirituality has at least partly shaped her account of the mystery of God.

Central in Hadewijch's writings is the theme of love seasoned by the encounter with the transcendent mystery of God (Mommaers 1989). In *Poems in Stanzas*, no. 31 (Hart 1980: 216–17) she writes how the essence of the taste of Love consists in 'consolation and ill treatment both at once'; she observes: 'The greater her love, the more crushing her burden.' Again, in *Poems in Stanzas*, no. 32, she describes Love as 'a master of contraries' while in *Poems*, no. 33, we read:

Inseparable satiety and hunger
Are the appanage of lavish Love,
As is ever well known by those
Whom Love has touched by herself.
Satiety: for Love comes, and they cannot bear her;
Hunger: for she withdraws, and they complain.
Her fairest enlightenments are heavy burdens;
Her sharpest assaults, renewed pleasures.

(Hadewijch, *Poems in Stanzas*, no. 33;
Hart 1980: 222)

Hadewijch expresses a theme that is well-known to scholars of mysticism, namely, that of *epektasis*: a dialectic of continuous yearning for God and satiation, which only

elicits even stronger desire. The *epektasis* of desire and fulfilment finds an analogue in the theme of detachment and involvement, and fruition and activity, as we will see. It is noteworthy that she develops these themes in two ways. First (as in *Letter 6*), she provides a Christological basis (Faesen 2008), associating the hunger with the abandonment that Christ as a human being experienced, and the satiety and fulfilment with his divinity. We will not elaborate on this. Secondly, she also links a dialectic of detachment and involvement with her account of the Trinity, and this is of immediate relevance to our topic. In *Letter 12* (Hart 1980: 71), for instance, she describes how friends of God enjoy his fruition, ‘and they are flowing into his goodness and flowing out again in all good’ (*Ende in siere goetheit sijn vloyende Ende weder vloyende in allen goede*). *Letter 17*—one of her theologically richest letters—has this participation in the dialectic of the Godhead as its central theme. Hadewijch opens the letter with a poem:

Be generous and zealous for every virtue,
But do not apply yourself to any one virtue.
Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,
But perform no particular work.
Have good will and compassion for every need,
But take nothing under your protection.

(Hadewijch, *Letter 17*; Hart 1980: 82)

She goes on to explain that ‘to be generous and zealous’ must be seen as a participation in the nature of the Holy Spirit, for it is proper to the Holy Spirit to be generous (because of the Holy Spirit’s ‘ecstatic’ nature as the expression of Love between the Father and the Son within the life of the Trinity). ‘Not to apply yourself to any one virtue’ reflects the economic-Trinitarian role of the Father (who, unlike the Son and the Holy Spirit, is not being ‘sent’ into the world). This dialectic of involvement and detachment reflects, therefore, the nature of the Trinity as such, in its outgoing and in-drawing aspects. Hadewijch concludes this particular passage (Hart 1980: 82): ‘This pouring out (*vte gheuen*) and keeping back (*op houden*) are the pure Divinity and the entire Nature of Love.’ But the Father is not inactive. After all he is the source of the other Persons. Hence, the Father is active and powerful, and also the pole that attracts and draws the other Persons within. This, again, implies for us a spirituality of detachment and involvement:

Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,
But perform no particular work.

(Hadewijch, *Letter 17*; Hart 1980: 82)

The first verse, Hadewijch explains, expresses ‘the power of the Father, whereby he is God almighty. The second verse expresses his just will, with which his justice works its unknown mighty works.’ (Hart 1980: 82). These works are unfathomable and hidden, and reflect the Father’s nature as the Unity of the Trinity which draws everything back

into him. When our life participates in this ‘rhythm of the Trinity’ (as Mother Columba Hart, the translator, titles this *Letter*) we have indeed ‘the most perfect life one can attain on earth’ (Hart 1980: 82).

Have good will and compassion for every need,
But take nothing under your protection.

(Hadewijch, *Letter* 17; Hart 1980: 82)

Again, the first verse refers to the outgoing aspect, this time of the Son, for it was proper to the Son, Hadewijch argues, to have good will and be compassionate. ‘Take nothing under your protection’ is an admittedly somewhat enigmatic way to describe the other pole, the dimension of drawing back in, or of detachment: for it belongs to the Father to engulf or devour (*verslantene*) the Son back into the divine unity.

Letter 17 is both elusive and highly evocative. What seems clear, however, is that Hadewijch sees the Divinity in terms which are both dynamic and dialectical, that is, as fruitive unity, on the one hand, and activity in the Persons, on the other. In the fruition of Love at the heart of the Deity, ‘there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition’. The Persons, on the other hand, represent the active, outgoing aspect. While the divine justice swallows up all things into itself, ‘yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him’ (Hart 1980: 83). Similarly, we are encouraged to be active and yet fruitive, involved and detached.

In conclusion, Hadewijch has developed a profound spirituality which is deeply shaped by the divine dynamics of flowing out and drawing in. Her theology of the Trinity is shaped by her living encounter with God who is intimate and yet transcendent, generous and avid, a source of fulfilment and ever-lasting longing. Jan van Ruusbroec will adopt this dialectic of flowing out and drawing back in and develop it in an even more explicitly Trinitarian manner.

* * *

Ruusbroec, like Hadewijch before him, describes the Christian life in terms of receiving and giving. God bestows his gifts but demands in return our loving response manifested in works. Like Hadewijch, Ruusbroec considers this bestowing and demanding a reflection of the Trinitarian life itself: God is both generous and desirous, even ‘avid’: ‘our heavenly Father shows his beloved ones that he not only is avaricious and generous in demanding and in giving but that he is avarice and generosity itself’ (*The Seven Rungs*, 847–9; de Baere and Mertens 2014: 616). It is clear that Ruusbroec’s account of the Christian life is deeply shaped by his theology of the Trinity, and vice versa. Drawing on a rich medieval tradition (Augustinian, Ps-Dionysian, twelfth-century Cistercian, Bonaventuran, and beguine and Rhineland influences), Ruusbroec develops a highly original mystical theology of the Trinity which shapes every aspect of his thought. The Bonaventuran influence manifests itself in Ruusbroec’s view that the Father generates his Son from the fruitfulness of his paternal nature. From the mutual contemplation of the Father and his Word the Holy Spirit proceeds as their bond of Love. However, Ruusbroec then introduces an important

innovation. As was discussed in Chapter 20, Ruusbroec argues that the Holy Spirit, as the bond of Love between Father and Son, is the principle of the return of the divine Persons into their perichoretic unity, from which the whole dynamic process starts all over again. In a famous passage from *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec writes:

The flowing of God always demands a flowing-back, for God is a flowing, ebbing sea which flows without cease into all his beloved, according to each one's needs and dignity. And he is ebbing back in again, drawing all those whom he has endowed on heaven and earth, together with all that they have and can do.

(Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, b986ff.; de Baere and Mertens 2014: 196–7)

Ruusbroec therefore identifies three moments in the life of the Trinity: a first one in which (a) the Son and the Holy Spirit go out from the Father; (b) they then flow back into the divine unity, where (c) they rest in enjoyment or fruition.

Scholastic theologians discussed the principle of *regyratio*, *reditus*, or *motus circularis* but they generally refused to apply it to the intra-Trinitarian life itself (Emery 1995:88ff.; Van Nieuwenhove, 2000). Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas were happy enough to consider creation and sanctification in circular terms—from God to God—but they did not attribute it to the intra-Trinitarian processions themselves. Albert (*I Sent.* d. 11, a. 1, ad 9; 1893: 337) for instance, expresses his concern that *regyratio* may imply a diminishment of the Son's *vis spiralis* (the power to spirate). Thomas Aquinas uses the term once in a Trinitarian context (*I Sent.* d. 14, q. 2, a. 2; Emery 1995: 393). Following Albert, he associates *regyratio* with the origin of creatures in God and their return to God. As the final goal of things mirrors their origin, the return to God occurs through the same divine realities from which they originated. In other words, Thomas does not attribute the movement of return to the immanent Trinity but reserves the term to describe the *reditus* of created things to God—a return that is made possible by the historical mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The dynamic of *exitus–reditus* refers to the Trinitarian economy, not the immanent Trinity (Emery 1995: 402).

Mystical theological authors will show less hesitancy. We have already seen how Hadewijch's notion of God is a highly dynamic one, flowing out and drawing us back in. Meister Eckhart, too, applied the notion of *regyratio* to the immanent Trinity but he, inspired by proposition 15 of *Liber de Causis*, associated it especially with the *reditio completa*, the complete return of the Word to the Father, in which the soul as image is said to participate (Van Nieuwenhove 2000). For Eckhart the 'return' retained a deeply intellectual character. Ruusbroec, then, associates the return or *regyratio*—which he translates literally and accurately in Middle Dutch as *wederbooghen*—of the divine Persons especially with the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son. In a passage taken from his final work, *The Twelve Beguines*, Ruusbroec puts it as follows:

The lofty essence of the threeness of God is eternally empty, without activity, and immoveable, according to essential being. But the nature of the Persons is fruitful, eternally active as to the mode of the Persons. For the Father gives birth to his Son as someone other (from him) out of his nature; and the Son is born of the Father as the

eternal Wisdom of God . . . And the Father with the Son pour forth from themselves the Holy Spirit, who is one nature with both of them. And thus there is oneness in nature and otherness in Persons, for in the relations of the Persons there is mutual knowledge and love, flowing and flowing back between the Father and the Son by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the Love of both of them.

(Ruusbroec, *The Twelve Beguines*, 2b36ff.; de Baere and Mertens 2014: 677–8)

As indicated, the Bonaventuran influence is obvious in Ruusbroec's description of the processions of Word and Holy Spirit: the fruitfulness of the paternal nature leads to the generation of the Son from the Father, and from their mutual contemplation the Holy Spirit proceeds as their bond of Love. The innovative element in Ruusbroec's view is the notion that the divine Persons flow back into the divine essence. The Holy Spirit, as the mutual bond of Love between Father and Son, is the unifying principle who initiates the loving return into the divine unity. After all, it belongs to the nature of Love to return what it receives (*Minnen natuere es altoes gheven ende nemen*), not because it feels indebted, but rather out of sheer gratuity, in order to allow the other to give once more, in a never-ending dynamic of giving and receiving love (Ruusbroec, *The Twelve Beguines*, 2b 674; de Baere and Mertens 2014: 692; see Van Nieuwenhove, 2003: 136–8).

Ruusbroec therefore describes the Trinity as 'an ebbing, flowing sea', with the Son and the Holy Spirit *going out* from the Father, and then *flowing back* into the divine unity, where they *rest* in enjoyment. This never-ending dynamic of divine going out, flowing back in, and resting in enjoyment informs every aspect of Ruusbroec's theology. The notion of Love as bestowed and returned moulds, for instance, his understanding of the economy of grace: God bestows his grace but we need to 'return' (or respond to) his gift through our charitable works. Similarly, the gift of the God-man can be seen in the same way: God bestows his Son but in the humanity of the God-man we are allowed to participate in the return of this gift—a perspective which allows us to interpret the cross and the eucharist in terms of the Trinitarian dynamic of Love bestowed and returned (Van Nieuwenhove 2003: 138–56). As we saw in Chapter 20, it also shapes his notion of the common life: the mature Christian will engage in virtuous activity (thereby mirroring the 'activity' of the divine Persons in the bosom of the Trinity) and also 'rest' in God (just like the divine Persons 'rest' in the shared essence). Ruusbroec describes this integration of activity and rest as the common life where our engagement with the external world, our life of interior devotion, and contemplative fruition of God constitute a participation in the intra-Trinitarian life of the outgoing processions (of the Word and the Holy Spirit), their return into the divine unity, and their perichoretic fruition.

In conclusion, many theologians throughout the tradition—from Augustine to Barth and von Balthasar—have claimed that our knowledge of the life of the Trinity necessarily involves a participation in it. Ruusbroec's claim that the Person of the Holy Spirit represents the dimension of both *exitus* and *reditus* can, however, better account for our participation in the Spirit as a moment of return to the Father. As indicated, in both the interpersonal and intrapersonal model the Holy Spirit represents the ecstatic moment, the climax and manifestation of the loving contemplation of Father and his Word. Both models can therefore adequately account for the Holy Spirit as the Gift in whom all gifts

are bestowed. But they lack the theological resources to explain how our participation in the Holy Spirit can constitute our return to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit—the *reductio* that Thomas Aquinas alluded to in the extract we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. One of the attractive aspects of Ruusbroec's model is that it can do just that: it contains the resources for explaining that the Holy Spirit as Love is not simply Love Bestowed on us by the Father and the Son but also a Love that Returns to the Father, in which we can share.

This circumvents the problem that the two traditional models face, i.e. the discrepancy between the outlines of the immanent Trinity (in terms of generation of the Word followed by the procession of the Holy Spirit) and the economic Trinity (in which we find that the Holy Spirit both precedes and follows the mission of the Son). Ruusbroec's innovation of attributing a *reditus* to the immanent Trinity itself coheres much better with the witness of the economy, in which the Holy Spirit both precedes and fulfils the mission of the Son. It allows us to see how our entire response to the Gift of Holy Spirit in our Christian lives, prayer, liturgical participation, theological activity, charitable activities . . . can be seen as a genuine sharing in the return of the Holy Spirit, with the Son, to the Father.

It seems to us that is one instance in which mystical theological authors have made a genuine and exciting contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity, the central mystery of the Christian faith, and they do so from within their living union with God. If there is any merit in this proposal, it further illustrates the first point we tried to make: true and living knowledge of the Trinity presupposes participation.

SUGGESTED READING

Crozier (2018); Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove (2011); McIntosh (1998); Van Nieuwenhove (2003).

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CHAPTER 25

CHRISTOLOGY

AMY HOLLYWOOD AND RACHEL SMITH

I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.

(ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου)

(Colossians 1: 24)

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

(John 14: 12)

SARA Ritchey opens her book, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity*, with a scene that will be familiar to many. Attending a conference on medieval Christianity focused on the theme of nature, Ritchey noticed that ‘down one hall, the majority of the women attended sessions on “spirituality,” which featured female scholars and addressed medieval women’s writings or women’s lives. Down another, the sessions on “theology” were attended primarily by men and featured mostly male speakers who addressed the likes of Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Scotus.’ This in itself might be cause for concern; more alarming was the response to a lecture on Aquinas. When a woman involved in pastoral education asked if Thomas’s understanding of nature and grace might be recast in terms of motherly love, Ritchey tells us, the speaker responded, ‘Yes. But . . . that’s not theology’ (Ritchey 2014: p. vii).

The vignette speaks to us because we are increasingly convinced that much of what is most innovative in what we unhesitatingly refer to as medieval mystical theology is rendered invisible by a refusal to recognize as theologically salient claims that do not cohere with some unspoken—and no doubt often shifting—set of assumptions about ‘what medieval Christians believed’. These dismissals take a particular form, the history of which is ripe for analysis. Rather than dismissing the notion of God as mother out of hand—can any self-respecting medievalist do this over thirty years after Caroline Walker Bynum’s groundbreaking *Jesus as Mother?*—scholars uncomfortable with such imagery cordon it off into the domain of spirituality or devotion, places in which purportedly

theologically imprecise language can work to comfort and persuade without being taken as 'true'. Spirituality and devotion are places of fuzzy, if well-intentioned, thinking about God, as opposed to the rigorous spaces of theology.

Yet at least since the groundbreaking work of Jean Leclercq, who carefully demonstrated that monastic texts previously thought to be 'merely' devotional in fact were imaginatively, affectively, and intellectually rich works of theology, scholars like Bynum, Bernard McGinn, Barbara Newman, Mark Jordan, and Patricia Dailey—just to name a few—have carefully and creatively demonstrated the multiple ways in which theology has been written across the history of Christianity (of particular interest to us here, more specifically, in the Western Christian Middle Ages). Our contention is that, when looked at with this broader view, with attention not only to scholastic theology but also to hagiography, vision books, didactic letters, poems, and spiritual guidebooks, a more complex story about the history of Christian theology emerges.

Many of the most novel claims discovered when attention is given to a wide array of textual and other material concern Christology. At the forefront of our chapter will be authors—male and female—within the Western Christian tradition who claim that human beings might be so fully united with Christ as to be an *alter Christus* or, alternatively, who are claimed by others to have attained that state. Francis of Assisi is the most famous example, of course, but the theme can be found among Francis's contemporaries, particularly in the hagiographies of Cistercian, Benedictine, and beguine women who lived in the Low Countries during the twelfth and thirteenth century. The demand that one ought to become like Christ—so like Christ, in fact, that one's own actions and Christ's actions are indistinguishable—also appears throughout the mystical literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. (Newman has written beautifully of the way in which some medieval women challenged God's love of humanity with the strength of their own love, thus getting souls out of purgatory and, in the case of Mechthild of Magdeburg, even out of hell) (Newman 1995). The enormous differences between theologians like Bonaventure and Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart, render their similarly radical Christologies all the more enticing, for they all claim that human beings can be fully conformed to Christ in a way that raises questions about the singularity of the incarnation. This is not to deny that this historical event is vital for them. It is. But it is not the end of the Christological story, in a way that is likely to give modern readers pause.

We say modern readers, for it is we who have taken certain formulations concerning the nature of Christ and Christ's saving work as axiomatic for the study of medieval texts. Might theologians before Trent have been more open in their explorations of Christ? Is the depiction of Francis as *alter Christus* merely a popularized visual representation meant to appeal to illiterate and theologically naïve devotees of the saint's cult? Or might it perhaps represent a set of claims about that to which the Christian can aspire that radically unseat a number of assumptions about Christological orthodoxy during the Western Christian Middle Ages? The assertion of Christ's singularity is most certainly vital to pre-modern Western Christianity, but we challenge those who insist it is the *only* meaningful theological claim made about Christ. Instead, we argue that mystical texts

make theological arguments about Christ that stand in tension with his purported singularity. To demonstrate this, we will begin with the more recognizable—and more recognizably theological—Christological arguments, before exploring how certain medieval texts and communities push against these strictures.

THE CHALCEDONIAN ORTHODOXY

After four centuries of debate about the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God the Father and about the relationship between the Son's humanity and his divinity in the person of Christ, in 451 the council of Chalcedon collated and produced a series of documents within whose terms subsequent debates within Western Christianity would operate, at least until the Protestant Reformation and in many cases to the present. At Chalcedon, the Son was said to be 'coessential (*homooúision*) with the Father as to his deity' and 'coessential (*homooúision*) with us—the very same one—as to his humanity, being like us in every respect apart from sin'. Christ, like all human beings, possessed both a rational soul (*psychēs logikēs*) and a body (*somatos*), hence his coessentiality with us. Yet he was also fully divine. He was, so the Council declared, 'two natures (*dúo phúsesin*) in one person (*prosopon*) and one hypostasis (*hypostasis*)' (www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html).

For defenders of what is often referred to as the Chalcedonian orthodoxy, the singularity of Christ (one person and one hypostasis) and his doubleness (as both fully human and fully divine) are essential to his saving work. A solely human Christ, lifted up into the divinity by the Father, might serve as a model for human behaviour, but offers no assurance to the Christian that she herself might similarly be deified. Yet Christ as solely divine also offers little hope to humanity, as any path from its fallen state back to God seems arcane, esoteric, and obscure, only for elites able somehow to penetrate the truths told by this divine being when he passed through the world in human form. While other stories can be told about how a solely human or a solely divine Christ might save, for those who fought for the formulation of Chalcedon, a Christ who is either only human or only divine could not be a source of comfort and salvation to the Christian.

Despite the intensity of these debates and the clarity with which scholars now recognize the questions about human redemption that spark them, a rich account of why only a fully human and fully divine Christ could save did not appear until more than six hundred years later. Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Human*) not only repeats the Chalcedonian position, but also carefully argues that it was both possible and fitting that God take on the indignity of human nature, both body and soul. Moreover, if humanity is to be saved, Anselm argues, it is necessary that he do so; for Anselm, only the God-human can save. Taking issue with claims that through sin, humanity fell into the clutches of the devil, and so only God can free us from the 'devil's right' to possess us, Anselm insists that the devil can have no rights before God and certainly no power over God. God's saving act must be generated by God's own reasons, by a necessity internal to the Godhead, not by any presumed debt to the devil—or to humanity.

Yet Anselm also cites critics who argue that it is unfitting for God to become human. These anonymous critics argue that God is impassible and so ‘can in no sense be brought down from its loftiness or toil in what it wills to do’ (Fairweather 1956: 110). To these critics, Anselm responds with the Chalcedonian formula:

But we say that the Lord Jesus Christ is true God and true human, one person (*personam*) in two natures (*naturam*) and two natures in one person. Thus, when we say that God bears humiliation or weakness, we do not apply this to the sublimity of the impassible nature, but to the weakness of the human substance which he bore, and so we know no reason that opposes our faith. For we do not ascribe any debasement to the divine substance, but we show that there is one person, God and human. Therefore, in the incarnation of God we do not suppose that he undergoes any debasement, but we believe that the nature of the human is exalted.

(Fairweather 1956: 110, tr. modified)

Here Anselm makes use of another provision of the Council, which insists that what is said of Christ in his humanity does not bear on his divinity and what is said of Christ in his divinity does not bear on his humanity. Yet as the Council also argues, the unity of human and divine in the singular person of Christ allow us to use expressions referring to both his humanity and divinity to speak of Christ himself.

To be emphasized here is the *singularity* of Christ; not only is he one person in two natures, but he is the sole figure in whom this unity occurs and it is through Christ alone that the salvation of human beings can be achieved. The heart of Anselm’s argument lies here, for the freely given gift of the Son’s sacrifice in becoming human and dying on the cross is only *fitting* if humanity could be saved in no other way. Central to Anselm’s argument are the concepts of God’s honour and God’s justice, both of which are indivisible from God Godself. Justice demands that God’s honour be maintained. To sin is to dishonour God. Humans have sinned, thereby dishonouring God, and God’s justice demands redress; otherwise, Anselm explains ‘God will be either unjust to Godself or powerless to accomplish’ the repayment or punishment for human sin. Yet the dishonour done to God through the act of human disobedience is so great that no human being can ever hope to repay it.

Here we find Anselm’s incredibly stark and implacable account of the dishonour done to God by the smallest act of human disobedience. *Cur Deus Homo* takes the form of a dialogue between Anselm and Boso. Anselm leans heavily on the dialogue form in his attempt to impress on readers the enormous sinfulness of even the slightest disobedience. Anselm questions Boso about the effects of a ‘single glance in opposition to the will of God’ (138).

- A. Not to keep you too long—what if it were necessary for the whole world and all that is not God to perish and be reduced to nothingness, if you would do such a small thing against God’s will?
- B. When I consider the act itself, I realize that it is a very trifling thing, but when I see how it is against God’s will, I recognize that it is of the greatest weight, and cannot be compared with any loss. But sometimes we act against someone’s will, yet without blame, in order to preserve his property, and afterward he is pleased with what we did against his will.

- A. This is done for a person who sometimes does not understand what is to his advantage, or who cannot replace what he loses. But God is in need of nothing, and, if all things were to perish, he could replace them, just as he made them.
- B. I must admit that I should do nothing against God's will, even if to preserve the whole creation.
- A. What if there were worlds full of creatures, as this is?
- B. If they were infinitely multiplied and spread before me in the same way, I should make the same reply. (Fairweather 1956: 137–8, tr. modified)

Hence a mere glance away from God is worth more than all of creation and all imaginable creations. To make satisfaction for even the smallest sin, Anselm insists, demands that 'you repay something greater than that for the sake of which you were obliged to commit the sin' (Fairweather 1956: 139). Nothing—not the entire universe nor all imaginable universes—is greater than God; such repayment, then, is impossible for human beings. (We can only follow Boso here: 'This is a very painful conclusion.')

Yet there is also hope in this situation, according to Anselm, for God is capable of creating and recreating all possible worlds and so is able to repay God for the dishonour done to God through the slightest act of human disobedience. Thus, as Anselm concludes, human beings owe God restitution, but do not have the ability to provide it; God has the ability, but does not owe God anything. Only the God-human both can and ought to repay God for humanity's sin. Out of his freely given gift to humanity, Christ does precisely this:

Therefore, for the God-human to do this, the person who is to make this satisfaction must be both perfect God and perfect human, because none but true God can make it, and none but true human owes it. Thus, while it is necessary to find a God-human in whom the integrity of both natures is to meet in one person—just as body and rational soul meet in one human—for otherwise the same person could not be perfect God and perfect human. (Fairweather 1956: 152, tr. modified)

Through his incarnation and death on the cross, the God-human pays humanity's debt, a redemption not required by God (for God's honour can never truly be harmed), but demanded by God's 'unchanging truth' (Fairweather 1956: 181). God's mercy flows from God's justice and it is through their singular instantiation in the person of Christ that humanity's salvation is rendered possible. Christ, the singular God-human, reconciles divinity and humanity, thereby overcoming the alienation between God and creation.

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST IN HIGH MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

For Anselm, as for his predecessors and followers, Christological formulations not only articulate the nature of Christ, but also provide models for the practice of individuals and communities. The Christ who reconciles human and divine in and through his person

also provides a model for human behaviour. This seamless movement from the person of Christ to the life of believers is articulated in key biblical texts. In the Christological hymn of Philippians 2: 6–11, for example, Christ's self-emptying (*kenōsis*) provides a pattern for the life and ethos of the community at Philippi. Christ,

though he was in the form (*morphē*) of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied (*ekenōsen*) himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness (*homoiōmati anthrōpōn*).
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

(Phil. 2: 6–8 NRSV)

The new relationship between God and the world enabled by Christ leads to a mimetic relationship between Christ and the community. The community, Paul writes, ought to have the same 'mind' as Christ (*phronēte*); by virtue of this shared mind they are then able to practise the 'same love', a love that is manifest through caring for others in humility and service (Phil. 2: 1–5). Through the exercise of love, believers are given the opportunity 'not only of believing' (*pisteuein*) in Christ, but of 'suffering for him' (*paschein*) (Phil. 1: 29). Hence the biblical roots of the mimesis or imitation of Christ, a set of practices that at times will come to stand in tension with claims to Christ's singularity.

In the High and Later Middle Ages, Anselm's emphasis on the necessity and fittingness of God becoming human in order to effect salvation comes together with a valorization of the 'apostolic life' of the New Testament, interpreted as an imitation of Jesus's disciples as they 'take up his cross' and 'follow' him (Matt. 16: 24).¹ The Pauline injunction to believe in, suffer for, and become like Christ takes on a new life. The most famous of those who sought and achieved the imitation of Christ is the Umbrian saint, Francis of Assisi (1181/82–1226). For Francis, imitation of Christ in his humanity enabled him to enact the divine will and become united to God. In the *Testament*, dictated before his death, Francis explains his vocation as a divine call to align himself with the despised and rejected. Francis did not just pursue the by then standard elements of the apostolic life—'penance, poverty, and preaching'—but, as Bernard McGinn writes, 'a total acceptance of the core of the gospel message as identity with the abject Christ on the cross' (McGinn 1998: 43). This motif of crucifying oneself with Christ, we have seen, is at least

¹ On this see Richard Southern, who argues that there occurred an 'Anselmian transformation', in the wake of Anselm's insistence that Christ's possession of a complete human nature was necessary and fitting in his redemptive work. Moreover, Anselm narrated the salvation drama as one occurring between God and humanity, rather than God and the devil (Southern 1990: 99–112; Southern 1953: 224–40).

as old as Paul (Gal. 2: 20; 5: 24; 6: 14). However, McGinn argues that Francis's enactment of this pattern was novel in the 'totally uncompromising way in which he tried to fulfill what it meant to follow the crucified Christ by witnessing to the gospel in the world' (McGinn 1998: 43).

In what is commonly referred to as the *First Life* (*vita prima*), the first of many hagiographies of Francis, Thomas of Celano paints a moving portrait of the Holy Spirit alive and at work in a contemporary figure, a man active among and on behalf of those around him. The first part of Thomas's account of Francis's life outlines the ways in which the saint recapitulated Jesus' earthly mission. Francis's voluntary poverty and persecution at the hands of his family (cf. Mark 3: 21) mark him as given over completely to the life of Christ (Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 1.4–6; Howell 1908: 10–16). Thomas describes Francis as an itinerant who travels in order that he might 'scatter everywhere the seeds of his word' through his preaching (Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 2.4; Howell 1908: 96; cf. Mark 4: 13–20) and as a preacher-healer with the power to cure many people, among them a crippled boy and a paralytic (cf. Mark 2: 1–12); a blind woman, a woman dying in childbirth, and demoniacs (Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 1. 22–6; Howell 1908: 62–9; cf. Mark 1: 23–6; 5: 1–20). As a result of his charisma, he attracts great crowds, including children who process to meet him (Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 1.22; Howell 1908: 61–2). Throughout, Francis is pictured not only as a true disciple of Christ, but as like Christ himself in his words and actions.

Francis's complete identification with Christ manifests itself on his body through his reception of the stigmata. Christ's wounds appear on Francis's body two years before his death, rendering his Christomorphic transformation complete. These wounds are the seal of what he performs throughout his life. As the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* writes, 'when he was finally complete and perfect in Jesus, by the impression of the sacred stigmata he was transformed into Him' (Green and Ragusa 1961: 3). In gazing at his body after death, Thomas explains, Francis's followers saw

the form of the Cross and Passion of the spotless Lamb who washed away the sins of the world, while he seemed as though lately taken down from the Cross, having his hands and feet pierced by nails, and his right side as though wounded by a lance.

(Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 2.9; Howell 1908: 112)

Francis becomes not one follower of Jesus among many, but the full and perfect inscription of Christ's image, another Christ (*alter Christus*). Thomas calls the stigmata a 'singular gift' (*singulare donum*), enabling Francis's flesh to become a 'sacrament' representing 'that mystery wherein the blood of the spotless Lamb streaming plenteously through five outlets has washed away the sins of the world'. He is worthy to receive this gift because 'with wondrous love he ever bore and preserved in his heart Christ Jesus and Him crucified'. The stigmata are a divine signature written into his flesh: 'he was signed in a most glorious [way] above all other people with the sign of Him whom in rapture of mind he even contemplated in glory unspeakable and incomprehensible'. In the perfection of his imitation, Francis manifests, Thomas asserts, a *novel* miracle,

performing what his followers had 'never...heard or read in Scriptures' but that was 'now displayed before their eyes' (Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 2.9; Howell 1908: 113).

Yet despite claims to the singularity of Francis's perfect imitation of Christ, there were others among his contemporaries about whom similar claims to complete identification with Christ were made. The Dominican hagiographer, Thomas of Cantimpré (c.1201–c.1270), active in the duchy of Brabant for much of the thirteenth century, writes of a number of women known for the intensity of their imitation of Christ and identification with him (see Faesen 2004: 47–63, on the difficulties of identifying Hadewijch). He, together with other hagiographers of the holy women of the Low Countries, makes extraordinary claims about the substitutionary capacities of those who imitate Christ in his suffering humanity, those who seek, in the words of Thomas's contemporary and compatriot, Hadewijch, 'to hang on the cross with him and pay humanity's debt to the full'. The most extraordinary of these accounts is *The Life of Christina the Astonishing* (VCM) completed in 1232.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Low Countries was a centre of religious experimentation and innovation. It was a time and place when forms of piety and spiritual aspirations that had been available only to those who took monastic vows spread outside of the convent walls. The laity, Herbert Grundmann observes, 'sought to realize Christianity as a way of life binding on every individual, a commitment more essential than one's place in the hierarchical *ordo*'. This was, he argues, a fundamental change in 'religious consciousness' (Grundmann 1995: 8). As an uncloistered laywoman 'not attached to any religious order nor to any beguine group' (Bolton 1978: 260), the Christina (1150–1224) depicted by Thomas exemplifies the experimental spirit of her time and place, seeking to realize her vocation as a woman in but not of the world, living a life of poverty, preaching, and penance in radical imitation of Christ. Christina's vocation expressed itself as a union with Christ in his mission on earth, a mission that entailed bodily and spiritual suffering on behalf of sinful human beings.

Thomas's *vita* builds on a brief comment made by the more famous and prominent churchman, James of Vitry, in the lengthy prologue to his *Life* of the beguine, Marie of Oignies (VMO). James writes of an unnamed woman, one of the holy virgins of Liège, those who

in the lily gardens of the Lord...scorned carnal enticements for Christ, despised the riches of this world for the love of the kingdom of heaven, clung to the heavenly Bridegroom in poverty and humility, and with the work of their hands, earned a sparse meal. (Jacques de Vitry, VMO, pr. 3; King 2006: 42)

A group of hagiographies produced in the wake of James's *Life of Marie of Oignies* elaborates on the picture James presents in the Prologue, describing *mulieres sanctae* who performed incredible ascetic actions, mutilating and cutting their bodies (see Jacques de Vitry, VMO 1.22; King 2006: 60), begging (Jacques de Vitry, VMO 2.45; King 2006: Simons 2001: 7; Grundmann 1995: 91), weeping until their tears create runnels in their faces (Jacques de Vitry, VMO, pr. 6; King 2006: 46), and living lives of chastity without

the protection of claustration (Jacques de Vitry, *VMO*, pr. 3; King 2006: 42), all in imitation of Christ in his suffering humanity. Of the transgressive, controversial women described by James, however, the unnamed woman Thomas will call Christina alone merits the descriptor *mirabilis*, for she, like Christ, was resurrected from the dead. As James recalls, in a passage cited directly by Thomas:

I saw (*vidi*) another in whom God worked so wondrously (*mirabiliter*) that after she had lain dead for a long time—but before her body was buried in the ground—her soul returned to her body and she lived again (*revixit*). She obtained from the Lord that she would endure (*sustineret*) purgatory, living in this world in her body. It was for this reason that she was afflicted for a long time by the Lord . . . But after she had performed penance in so many ways, she lived in peace and merited grace from the Lord and many times, rapt in spirit (*rapta in spiritu*), she led the souls of the dead as far as purgatory, or through purgatory as far as the kingdom of heaven, without any harm to herself. (Jacques de Vitry, *VMO*, pr. 8; King 2006: 48–9)

In her afflicted state, James writes, Christina sometimes rolled herself in fire, and in the winter she would remain for lengthy periods in icy water while at other times she was driven (*cogebatur*), like Antony before her, to enter the tombs of the dead (Jacques de Vitry, *VMO*, pr. 8; King 2006: 49). Thomas elaborates James's description of Christina's revived body, giving it the miraculous ability to suffer impossible pains yet not die or be marked by its tortures. Unlike James, however, he understands Christina's sustaining of purgatorial punishment on earth as a penitential act not for herself, but for others, her soul having already achieved perfection.

In the prologue to the *vita*, Thomas describes the young Christina's death, caused by 'too much contemplation'. Her soul then passes through a realm so horrifying she thinks it is hell, only to be told it is purgatory, the place of atonement. When she arrives at the divine throne, she agreed to be resurrected. God asks her to return to the flesh and

undergo there the punishment (*agere poenitentiam*) of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory, and by the example (*exemplo*) of your suffering and your way of life to convert living humans to me and make them turn aside from their sins, and after you have done all these things to return to me, having accumulated for yourself a reward of such great profit.

(*VCM* 6; and Newman 2008: 131)

Christina's resurrection involves three elements. First, she serves an intercessory function, as her earthly sufferings substitute for that of souls in purgatory. Second, she is an exemplar in the didactic sense, as her enactment of the pains of purgatory teaches those who see and hear her about purgatory and warn of its impending afflictions, thus goading them to convert away from their sinful lives. Finally, there is evidence that Christina desires to win for herself a reward greater than that of immediate entry into heaven, which she had already received at the time of her first death.

Christina chooses to return to the flesh, a return that renders her Christ-like, a female Christ—Christina—in ways unprecedented up until that time and matched among her contemporaries only by Francis. Once resurrected, she takes punishment onto her person to an extent made possible by the divine subtlety with which God endowed her resurrected body. Like James, Thomas writes that the now named Christina rolls in fire, immersed herself for long periods of time in icy water, and lives among the tombs of the dead (*VMO*, pr. 8; King 2006: 49; *VCM*, pr. 1; King and Newman 2008: 127). Thomas further tells us that she ‘acts the part of her own torturer’, submitting herself to judicial instruments of punishment like the wheel and the gallows (*VCM* 13; King and Newman 2008: 135). While these various deeds cause her great pain (necessary both for their penitential effect, which require the trade of agony for absolution, and for their likeness to Christ’s suffering), her body remains visibly uninjured (*VCM* 9, 11, 19; King and Newman 2008: 132–3, 135)—with one notable exception. When Christina runs through thorns, the volume of blood pouring from her body leads astonished witnesses to wonder ‘that there could be so much blood in a single body’ (*VCM* 14; King and Newman 2008: 136). This is Christina’s fleshly stigmata, for contemporary images of Christ on the cross often emphasize his bloodiness as much, if not more, than his woundedness.

Despite her marvellous body, Christina’s story is moving because of the way the text continually asserts her humanity—and the way in which her humanity is conformed to, becomes at times indistinguishable in its effects from, that of Christ. Unlike Antony of Alexandria whose body, Athanasius writes, was a perfect example of proportion and equanimity, his ‘soul’ being neither ‘constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection’, but maintaining ‘utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature’ (Gregg 1979: 42), Christina’s divine vocation causes her to experience intense grief for the sins of humanity and the terrors of purgatory faced by the unrepentant. In her wild sadness for the damned, she ‘wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and had no bones’, causing ‘[a]ll who saw her [to find] her sorrow so intolerable that even the hardest-hearted could not endure it without the greatest contrition and compassion’ (*VCM* 26; King and Newman 2008: 142). (She undergoes similar bodily contortions in her experience of the joy of God’s presence to her.) The extremity of her affective reactions give force to her spectacular performances, enabling her to become an effective exemplum, warning the community of the suffering that will befall them and giving voice to divine grief at their alienation.² The divine nature of her vocation is refracted, as is Christ’s, through her broken body. The power of God operative in her becomes visible through the impossible suffering and passion endured by her flesh.

Christina performs an *imitatio Christi* more literal than any other, including that of Francis. In fact, Thomas’s hagiographical representation of Christina’s *imitatio* renders

² See Simons 1994 on the ways in which proportion is said to be lost in many hagiographical accounts of beguinal ecstasies from the Southern Low Countries. Simons outlines the departure of such depictions from late antique ideals of holiness, particularly for women.

explicit her (and his) encroachment on the dogmatically declared singularity of Christ. Thomas persistently uses rhetorical tropes in which Christina outdoes Christ: while Christ died once, Christina dies three times (the first time as a young girl, the second time as a 74-year-old woman called back from the dead so that she can describe heaven to those around her, and a third time after this final witness is achieved); he was resurrected once, she twice. Moreover, she suffers pain for a much greater length of time than Christ did. Most importantly, her imitation is so fully one with that of Christ that she is able to take on the debt of others and to atone for their sins (see *VCM* 45; King and Newman 2008: 150). In other words, Christina performs precisely the kind of redemptive substitutions Anselm declares the necessary and sole prerogative of the God-human.

Thomas's language could be read as invoking a rhetoric of rivalry solely for pedagogical purposes; the excesses in his depiction of Christina are key to producing shock in its readers, a shock that might, like the actions depicted within the text, shake them from their sinful complacency. Certainly the effectiveness of Christina's actions depends on their partaking in the work of Christ on which they are modelled. Yet the necessity of Christ, clearly in evidence in both the lives of Francis and Christina, is not the same as his singularity. Here we see tensions within Western articulations of the role of Christ. On the one side, Anselm argues that Christ alone is necessary and sufficient to save humanity. On the other are New Testament claims like that found in Colossians 1: 24, which insists that the work of Christ was 'unfinished', or 'lacking', waiting to be completed by his human disciples through their own suffering.³ Francis and Christina are depicted in just this way and their suffering takes up where Jesus left off. They so fully follow Christ that they become one with him in his saving work. The hagiographical theologies of Thomas of Celano and Thomas of Cantimpré mark a redoubling of Christ's work and his being in the persons of Francis and Christina. The question is whether such claims can be reconciled with an Anselmian soteriology or whether instead they provide alternatives to it. This is a problem with which those writing in the midst of and in the wake of the apostolic revival will continue to wrestle.

BONAVENTURE

The person who most significantly shaped the image of Francis for posterity and linked it to Christology was the Franciscan friar Bonaventure (1221–74). Bonaventure's Christology is articulated in multiple genres, defying any notion of the separation between theology and spirituality, speculative thought and programmes for living. The Christ that emerges in these writings is the cosmic principle of mediation, the exemplar

³ In translations of Col. 1: 24, one sometimes sees an impulse to soften the force of the language through a recourse to the metaphysics of 'participation' (not present in the Greek), which implies that the follower of Jesus takes part in a divine power that precedes and remains somehow separate from the human being. Some translations also attempt or remove the language of incompleteness. For example, the New Living Translation renders the verse, 'I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue...'

of all created things, and the deeply human Jesus Christ of the incarnation. In Bonaventure's corpus, one finds the systematic reflections of a thirteenth-century scholastic, hagiographic portrayals of Francis as the ultimate imitator of Christ, and devotional treatises intended to stir up readers to greater love and compassion for the human Christ. The very dissimilarity of these works, however, points to a key aim of Bonaventure's theology, namely to demonstrate the inseparability of the cosmic and the mundane, the eternal and the temporal, the human and divine, and to show, in the words of the contemplative treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The Soul's Journey into God*), that 'reading... without unction, speculation without devotion... knowledge without love, understanding without humility' is not sufficient in the search for 'divine wisdom' (Bonaventure, *Journey*, prologue 4; Cousins 1978: 55).

Christ is the condition of the possibility of such a correspondence and perfectly embodies this union; Francis is the human being who fully realizes this truth in the wake of the incarnation through imitation of Jesus. As Denys Turner argues, the 'person of Christ informs [Bonaventure's] personal spirituality and Christology informs every aspect of his systematic theology'. Christology is the 'point at which converge and are reconciled the streams of theological influence that feed into his thought', and this Christology cannot be understood apart from his understanding of the Trinity (Turner 1995: 117).

In an important passage from the *Hexaemeron* (*The Six Days of Creation*), Bonaventure encapsulates key metaphysical principles, including the imbrication of the Trinitarian and Christological in his thought:

The Word expresses the father and the things made through him, and he is foremost in leading us to the unity of the Father who brings all things together. He is the Tree of Life because through this center (*medium*) we return and are given life in the fountain of life.... This is the metaphysical center that leads back and this is the sum total of our metaphysics: concerning emanation, exemplarity and consummation, that is, being illuminated by spiritual rays and being drawn back to the Highest Source.

(Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron* 1.17; tr. McGinn 1998: 88)

As articulated through the philosophical language of Christian Platonism, the Father is the *fontalis plenitudo* (fountain-fullness), the hidden source of all that is. Adopting the Dionysian principle that the good is necessarily self-diffusive, Bonaventure argues that the Father as the greatest good must give itself, overflow from hiddenness into expression (Bonaventure, *Journey* 6.2; Cousins 1978: 103; See Dionysius, *CH* 1.1–2; Luijckheid 1988a: 145–6; *DN* 4.1; Luijckheid 1988b: 71–2). This expression is Christ the Word, the perfect image of the invisible Father (Col. 1: 15), the speech that manifests the Father's silence. The Holy Spirit is generated by the relationship between these two persons. The Trinity, then, is 'marked by a dynamic self-diffusive goodness, which is communicative and expressive', a movement between silence and speech, hiddenness and revelation, unity and difference, that never ceases (Delio 2003: 12; See Bonaventure, *Journey*, chapter 6, on various paradoxes of the Trinity).

The intra-Trinitarian fecundity does not stop within the Godhead but overflows in the making and sustaining of creation. Creation is the 'limited expression of the infinite

and dynamic love between the Father and Son, a sharing of the 'infinite dynamic goodness' of God in a 'limited dynamic way' (Delio 2003: 12). It is an 'emanation', by which Bonaventure means the unnecessary but desired and loving flowing forth of the divinity into the making of creation (see Cousins 1978: 26).

The movement from Father's inaccessibility into the expression of divine plenitude in creation occurs through the Word. In its generation from the Father, the second person of the Trinity is filled with archetypes (*rationes aeternes*), the exemplary principles on which creation is founded and modelled (Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron* 1.12–17; Cousins 1978: 26). The second person of the Trinity, then, is the means by which all things come to be, the exemplar of created reality. The cosmos is a theophany, an external, finite expression of the eternal exemplar and the archetypes borne within him by virtue of the vitality of intra-Trinitarian life: 'The entire created world... is an objectification of that one inner Word' (Delio 2003: 13). Creatures are

shadows, echoes and pictures of that first, most powerful, most wise and most perfect Principle... they are vestiges, representations, spectacles proposed to us and signs divinely given so that we can see God. These creatures, I say, are exemplars or rather exemplifications presented to souls still untrained and immersed in sensible things so that through sensible things which they see they will be carried over to intelligible things which they do not see as through signs to what is signified.

(Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron* 2.11; tr. Cousins 1978: 26)

The exemplarity underlying the representational capacity of all things is the foundation for the third metaphysical principle outlined by Bonaventure, 'consummation', the 'being drawn back again of all things to the Highest Source', or as he says in the previously quoted passage, being 'carried over into intelligible things'. The 'material universe is a ladder by which we may make... ascent' to God (Turner 1995: 107).

As 'shadows, echoes, and pictures' of God, emerging from the archetypes within the Son, the second person not only mediates the emanation of divinity in the procession that forms creation, but also the restoration of all things to God, for the ladder linking all creation to the divine source runs in both directions. Creatures may read the Word in the book of nature, which is its source, foundation, and end.

The Fall, however, disrupts the capacity of the human eye to read the divine through the signs of creation. The 'mirror presented by the external world', Bonaventure writes at the outset of the *Itinerarium* is 'of little or no value unless the mirror of our soul has been cleaned and polished' (Bonaventure, *Journey*, prologue 4; Cousins 1978: 56). The trace of God in the world, which teaches the soul about its source and so uplifts the soul to its divine origin, cannot be apprehended by a soul sick with sin.

A second and related effect of the Fall is the compromised signifying capacity of things. Creatures signify God in 'three modes of expression', as vestige (*per vestigium*), image (*per imaginem*), and likeness (*per similitudinem*) (Turner 1995: 108). All creatures, sentient and non-sentient, are vestiges. The image is held by rational souls, while to reflect divinity as a likeness is to be holy; to thus share in divine perfection, however, is enabled only by grace. While to be 'an image' of God is a function of 'the order of nature'

and is seen in the 'natural powers of the soul, namely memory, intellect and will; likeness 'is an actual sharing, and is the common possession of a quality; and because the quality by which the soul is made like to God is grace; for this reason, a likeness is; said to be something in the order of grace' (Turner 1995: 111). As Denys Turner notes, what is at stake in Bonaventure's distinction between image and likeness is the difference between the 'mimetic, purely formal character of correspondence with what it [the soul] images and its participatory character of sharing, through grace, in the reality which it represents' (Turner 1995: 111).⁴

The solution to the Fall, both the problem of incapacitated perception and the loss of the ability to fully signify the divine, is the incarnation; Christ renews the presence of God within history and humanity as the perfect expression of divinity, just as Christ himself is enfleshed yet again in the word of scripture. The Son, the original medium of creation, thus becomes a mediator, reconciling creation and divinity (see McGinn 1998: 91). Bonaventure relates the two forms of damage and their solution in the fourth chapter of the *Itinerarium*:

No matter how enlightened one may be by the light of natural and acquired knowledge, he cannot enter into himself to delight within himself in the Lord unless Christ be his mediator... The image of our soul, therefore, should be clothed with the three theological virtues, by which the soul is purified, illumined and perfected. And so the image is reformed and made like the heavenly Jerusalem.

(Bonaventure, *Journey*, 4.2–3; Cousins 1978: 88–9)

Following Christ's intervention, the human being is able to 'delight in the Lord'; the image of God in the soul is restored, and it is reformed according to heavenly proportions. God is now legible because both the likeness of the soul to God and God's vestiges and images in creation are restored through Christ and his grace.

Like Anselm, the redemptive capacity of Christ relies on the perfect union of contraries in the incarnation of God; divine and human, human both as flesh and spirit, are knit together in order to overcome the alienation between God and creation. The coincidence of opposites, as Cousins calls it, finds its ultimate expression in the crucified Christ and it is only through him that the soul may return to God (Cousins 1968: 28). Thus in the prologue of the *Itinerarium* Bonaventure writes that 'There is no other path [to the return of the soul to God] but through the burning love of the Crucified' (Bonaventure, *Journey*, prologue, 3; Cousins 1978: 54). Francis is the model of one who, like Paul, conforms perfectly to Christ crucified. Francis demonstrates the union of the crucified body with the realization of contemplative ascent (Bonaventure, *Journey*, prologue, 3; Cousins 1978: 54–5), and in his ecstatic vision, he becomes the 'example of perfect contemplation as he had previously been of action' (Bonaventure, *Journey*, 7.3; Cousins 1978: 112). The *Itinerarium* itself, Bonaventure writes, began as a meditation on

⁴ In becoming similitude, the natural image of God is not, Turner further argues, displaced; rather, 'the infused grace of [the] virtues brings the natural image participatively into the Trinitarian life which it naturally images' (Turner 1995: 113).

the meaning of Francis's vision of the seraph 'in the form of the Crucified,' the vision through which he received the stigmata. Bonaventure saw that 'this vision represented our father's rapture in contemplation and the road by which this rapture is reached' (Bonaventure, *Journey*, prologue, 2; Cousins 1978: 54).

The *Itinerarium*, then, is closely linked to Bonaventure's two lives of Francis, the *Legenda Maior* and the *Legenda Minor*, a condensed version for use in liturgical contexts. Both were written in 1260 at the request of the General Assembly. In these texts, Francis is not simply another saint but 'the mirror of holiness and the exemplar of all Gospel perfection... glorified by a full draught from the fountain of life... transformed into a new creature... bear[ing] the image of Christ's passion by a singular privilege' (Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis* [*Legenda Maior*], 15.1; Cousins 1978: 321–2). Cousins argues that the innovation in Bonaventure's hagiographical efforts lies not so much in the novelty of the material he provides (Cousins lists his departures from Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer), but in the way that he structures the *Legenda Maior* (Cousins 1978: 38–9). As McGinn notes, Bonaventure unites the chronological events of Francis's life with his increasing spiritual conformity to Christ until 'he is totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not through the martyrdom of the flesh but by the fire of his love consuming his soul' (Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis*, 13.3; Cousins 1978: 306; see McGinn 1998: 94). In the *Legenda*, 'the traditional ascensional patterns of Dionysian spirituality are incorporated within a concrete life,' the horizontality of earthly life reconciled with the verticality of heavenly ascent (McGinn 1998: 95).

Franciscan descriptions of their founder's stigmata and its reception always interpret his bodily conformity to Christ as a novel and unique event in the history of miracles. Brother Elias, the first to write about the stigmata, describes the wounds as 'unheard of,' a 'new miracle,' marks that are 'truly the stigmata of Christ' (Davidson 2011: 286). We have already seen the emphasis on Francis's singularity found in Thomas of Celano's *Life*. Claims for Francis's exceptional—even singular—nature inspired much debate and even hostility. Some, like the Dominicans, among them Thomas of Cantimpré in his *Life of Christina the Astonishing*, competed with these claims to holiness, thereby undercutting claims to Francis's singularity. Others believed that an understanding of Francis as *alter Christus* threatened the singularity of Christ's incarnation. For example, a Bohemian bishop who was also a Cistercian denied that Francis received the stigmata and forbade the production of images depicting it, arguing that 'only the son of the eternal Father was crucified for the salvation of humanity and the Christian religion should accord but to his wounds alone a suppliant devotion' (Vauchez 1968: 601). This bishop was condemned by Gregory IX in the bull of April 1237 *Usque ad Terminus*; *Usque* countered that Francis's stigmata was 'the great singular miracle' (*grande ac singular miraculum*) (Davidson 2011: 284–5). The bull allows, then, for one unique repetition of the singular instance of the crucifixion. Dominican recognition of their own stigmatized saints, however, continued and continued to be experienced as a threat to Christ's singularity and to Franciscan claims for the singularity of Francis's conformity to Christ. Thus Sixtus IV's proscription in the 1472 bull *Spectat ad Romani* of the representation of

Catherine of Siena—a Dominican tertiary—‘with the stigmata, in the likeness of blessed Francis’ (Vauchez 1968: 611 n. 4; Davidson 2011: 285).

Like his predecessors, Bonaventure represents the stigmata of Francis as a novel miracle; as Arnold Davidson argues, Bonaventure goes even further and seeks to increase its miraculous status (Davidson 2011: 295). He transforms earlier accounts of Francis’s vision of the seraph and his reception of the stigmata in a number of ways. First, Bonaventure understands Francis’s vision as the ‘objective cause of the stigmata’ (together with its subjective cause, the ‘fire of his soul’): ‘As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body marks that were no less marvelous’ (Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis*, 13.3; Cousins 1978: 306). The vision itself imprints the marks of Christ on Francis’s body. Second, Bonaventure describes the appearance of the seraph in such a way that not only is the angelic presence identified with the crucified Christ, but the language of transubstantiation also renders the vision an encounter with the real presence:

When Francis saw this [the seraph with six wings descending from heaven, with a man crucified in the midst of the wings], he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked on him under the appearance of the Seraph (*sub specie Seraph*), but the fact that he was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword of compassion.

(Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis*, 13.3; Cousins 1978: 305–6)

The use of scholastic language typically used to explain how the eucharistic elements appear as bread and wine but are in fact the body and blood of Christ to describe the manifestation of Christ ‘*sub specie Seraph*’ assimilates Francis’s vision to the real presence of the eucharist (see Davidson 2011: 296 for this observation). The vision is an experience of the real presence of God and an assimilation of that presence, just as in eating the eucharist one takes God into oneself.

Bonaventure presents Francis as a unique figure in his manifestation of Christ and an ideal exemplar of the exemplar, yet his theology is profoundly Christocentric and careful to assert that spiritual growth occurs by means of and aims towards conformity to Christ. Francis’s union is absorptive and transformative, conforming his humanity entirely to Christ, but Bonaventure attempts throughout his theology to maintain the position of Christ as the origin and end of all that is, the irreducible, cosmic medium through whom grace is conferred and to which all must conform through a participation in him through grace. Francis is a model, revealer, and agent of Christ—one who attained most perfectly to the status of a similitude—but is the means to the means, not himself a saviour. Thus Bonaventure quotes the Gospel of John in the Prologue of the *Itinerarium*. Having just discussed Francis’s death to himself and ‘absorption’ in Christ so that he could, like Paul, say, ‘With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2: 20), Bonaventure insists that Francis can do so only through Christ: ‘He who enters not through the door [the Crucified], but climbs up another way is a thief and a robber’ (John 10: 1). Francis is singular in his movement in, through, and into Christ and Christ remains the singular figure through whom

salvation is achieved. Unlike Thomas of Celano, who suggests that Francis comes to share in Christ's saving activity, Bonaventure insists, with Anselm, that salvation comes through Christ alone.

HADEWIJCH

Others, however, will follow hagiographers like Thomas of Cantimpré in suggesting that human beings can become so like Christ as to participate in his salvific activity. This often entails participation in the suffering of the human Christ. Thus the thirteenth-century theologian Hadewijch of Brabant writes that to be one with God in his divinity requires union with Christ's humanity in its experiences of exile, loss, failure, and death. This suffering, Christ insists in a vision, is endured without the mitigating power of his divine nature (Hadewijch, *Vision 1*; Hart 1980: 269–70).

Hadewijch writes that there are many people who want to be one with Christ in his divinity, enjoying 'jubilation.' Few, however, are willing to endure the suffering required to be one with his humanity:

Nowadays . . . people wish to live with God in consolations and repose, in wealth and power, and share in the fruition of his glory. We all indeed wish to be God with God, but God knows there are few of us who want to live as human beings with his Humanity, or want to carry his cross with him, or want to hang on the cross with him and pay humanity's debt to the full. (Hadewijch, *Letter 6*; Hart 1980: 61)

Christ's humanity is exemplified in the crucifixion: he is forsaken by those he loves—most strikingly the Father—for the sake of a love that does not seek 'consolation and repose' but sacrifices itself in an act of excessive vulnerability on behalf of others. His physical and spiritual pain is without bounds and it is only through sharing in that suffering that one can come to full union with God.

Those who seek first the 'fruition of [Christ's] glory,' Hadewijch insists, are in fact pursuing their own pleasure, rendering God a commodity. A selfless union with the divinity is only possible through union with the humanity of Christ:

With the Humanity of God you must live here on earth, in the labors and sorrow of exile, while within your soul you love and rejoice with the omnipotent and eternal Divinity in sweet abandonment. For the truth of both is one single fruition. And just as Christ's Humanity surrendered itself on earth to the will of the Majesty, you must here with Love surrender yourself to both in unity. Serve humbly under their sole power. (Hadewijch, *Letter 6*; Hart 1980: 59)

To live as did the human Christ is to surrender to the will of God rather than attempting to fulfil one's own desires; this surrender leads to suffering, exile, and death. Loving in this way allows one to come, however, 'to the Divinity, and rightly know both [the

humanity and the divinity] in one single Nature,' for 'the truth of both is one single fruition' (Hadewijch, *Letter* 6; Hart 1980: 59).

Hadewijch's corpus consists of letters, songs, and visions, a formal variety that has led many until very recently to miss the extent of her theological learning and sophistication. It is clear, however, that the correspondence between the two forms of fruition relies on the principle of hypostatic union articulated at the Council of Chalcedon; just as the two natures of Christ are seamlessly united and yet remain unconfused, so the fruition experienced living the humanity (*ghebreken*), which entails pain and failure, and that experienced living the divinity (*ghebruken*), which entails blissful pleasure, are one. Both consist in living 'the one for the other' (Hadewijch, *Letter* 1; Hart 1980: 47; see Faesen 2016: 37). Such selfless love is the bridge between the two natures of Christ and thus the means of participating in Trinitarian life, which Hadewijch imagines as structurally parallel to the human Christ's relationship to the Father, a dynamic, ceaseless, 'hidden storm' arising from the continual flow of self-giving between the Father and the Son.

To unite with Christ in his humanity has radical implications in Hadewijch's work. When she writes that most do not wish to follow Christ in paying 'humanity's debt to the full', she suggests that full participation in Christ's humanity requires just such an effort to redeem others. In *Letter* 17, Hadewijch describes her transformation into Christ during a eucharistic vision experienced on the feast of the Ascension. At the moment of consecration Christ kissed her. This union, signified by the kiss, in turn enabled her to come into the presence of the Father. 'Having been made one with him', that is, Christ, the Father 'took him [the Son] for me, and me for him' (*daer nam hi hem over mi ende mi over hem*) (Hadewijch, *Letter* 17; Hart 1980, 84; tr. Arblaster and Faesen 2014: 26). Rob Faesen and John Arblaster note that the scribe of one manuscript wrote in the margin *accepit eam pro filio* (Arblaster and Faesen 2014: 26). Both Hadewijch's language and the scribe's interpretation reveal Hadewijch's profound assimilation with Christ, for she and the Son are perfectly interchangeable. The scribe uses explicitly eucharistic language, moreover, further emphasizing that the Father does not distinguish—perhaps cannot distinguish—between Hadewich (*eam*) and the son (*filio*), just as the bread and wine of the eucharist is indistinguishable, for the recipient, from Christ's body and blood.

In the seventh *Vision*, Hadewijch again describes union with the divinity through the mediation of the humanity in a eucharistic context. She writes that she desired 'to have full fruition (*ghebrukene*) of my Beloved, and to understand and taste him to the full. I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity' and, through this union with the humanity, enter into the perfection of 'grow[ing] up in order to be God with God, by giving "satisfaction" to God 'in all great sufferings' (Hadewijch, *Vision* 7; Hart 1980: 280; Van Mierlo 1924: 75). Christ then appears as a beautiful young man, giving himself 'in the shape of the sacrament'.

At this moment he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity (*in alle hare ghenoeghen*—as to their satisfaction), in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity... Also

then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nothing and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. It was thus: outwardly, to see, taste, and feel as one can outwardly taste, see, and feel in the reception of the outward Sacrament. So can the Beloved, with the loved one, each wholly receive the other in all full satisfaction (*ghenoech*) of the sight, the hearing, and the passing away of the one in the other.

After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself.

(Hadewijch, *Vision* 7; Hart 1980: 281–2; Van Mierlo 1924: 78)

Hadewijch's assimilation to Christ through the practice of love—living with Christ in his humanity—occurs here in a sacramental register. Christ comes to her to give her himself in sacramental form. She eats his body and blood, incorporating them into her own. Yet the vision goes further, for just as the eucharist becomes 'one without difference' from her as it is incorporated into her body, so she is received by Christ. He comes to nothing before her, marking the radicality of their union.⁵ In this mutual reception, the desire to 'satisfy' God that opened the vision is fulfilled.

The nature of this satisfaction is the subject of heated discussion among modern scholars. We contend that the term 'satisfaction' (*ghenoech*), which is central to the vision, can only be properly accounted for in light of Hadewijch's understanding of the role of Christ's humanity in union with God. 'Satisfaction' has been understood most often in the register of pleasure. Thus when Hadewijch writes that her 'members felt his in full felicity' (*in alle hare ghenoeghen*), scholars have interpreted her words as the description of an enjoyable physical encounter with Christ's body that then passes over into the bliss of union. However, as Rob Faesen notes, the 'basic theme [of the vision] concerns... how the *human* might participate in the life of *God*—which is a life of absolute love' (Faesen 2016: 42). As we have shown, one only becomes God with God, for Hadewijch, by becoming one with Christ in his humanity; Christ, the human being, loved with an absolute love marked inevitably by suffering and death. Thus Faesen argues that Christ allows Hadewijch to feel his humanity—his suffering in its absolute fullness, body and soul—for as long as she can bear it, in her humanity (Faesen 2016: 42).

⁵ Bernard McGinn argues that in Hadewijch one finds one of the first examples of the notion of union without distinction, later given explicit articulation by Meister Eckhart and others. This understanding of union goes beyond earlier understandings of *unitas spiritus*, in which union is conceived of as a joining, through love, of an infinite with a finite Spirit. In Hadewijch one finds such descriptions alongside a conception of the eternal, exemplary soul present in the abyss of the Trinity before the existence of a 'created nature', in which the soul is permanently grounded and by virtue of which it enjoys a union without distinction (see Visions 11 and 12). Thus in *Letter* 18 Hadewijch writes of God and the soul as 'mutual abysses, equally bottomless in the power of *Minne*'. These two infinite abysses are, in fact one, sharing a kiss 'with one single mouth' (*Poems in Couplets*, 12; cited by McGinn 1998: 214–17).

To understand 'satisfaction' in this way—as satisfying God by living love as did the human Christ—Hadewijch's work is drawn into the orbit of an Anselmian soteriology. 'To satisfy' God is, literally, to be 'enough' for God. Hadewijch tells us that she desires to give 'satisfaction in all great sufferings', to satisfy God through a life of suffering love and eucharistic consumption. Most importantly, in the vision, Hadewijch's desire is fulfilled. Hadewijch thereby suggests that in the wake of the incarnation, a person united to Christ becomes capable of the very thing that Anselm contends it is impossible for human beings to do, namely to 'satisfy' God. This impossibility necessitated the singular advent of the God-human who, as fully human and fully divine, suffered and died to pay the debt incurred by human disobedience. For Anselm as for Hadewijch, satisfaction is impossible apart from the humanity of Christ, but for Hadewijch the redeemed human performs again the work of satisfaction, continuing the unfinished work of Christ.

Yet even as Hadewijch claims that God satisfies her desire and that she satisfies God through following Christ in his humanity, another strand in her work resists any claim to satisfaction. In *Letter* 8, she speaks of two fears, the first that she cannot satisfy Love and the second that Love cannot satisfy her. The first fear is noble and faithful; the second Hadewijch calls 'unfaith'. It is, she explains, 'higher than any fidelity that is not abysmal... than a fidelity that allows itself to rest peacefully without the full possession of love, or than a fidelity that takes pleasure in what it has in the hand':

This noble unfaith greatly enlarges consciousness. Even though anyone loves so violently that he fears he will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts—even if anyone loves love so violently, nevertheless this noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust love, so much does unfaith enlarge desire. And unfaith never allows desire any rest in any fidelity but, in the fear of not being loved enough, continually distrusts desire. So high is unfaith that it continually fears that it does not love enough, or that it is not enough loved. (Hadewijch, *Letter* 8; Hart 1980: 65)

To remain in this inadequacy is to be Christ in his humanity and God with God—never the one without the other. Her letters, visions, and songs are riven with this mad love, a love that is never satisfactory to itself.

So for Hadewijch hell is the seventh and final name of 'this love wherein I suffer'. This love is God, God's love for her, and her love for God. It is the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity in its ever-expansive, ever-deepening, abyssal unity. It is the tumultuous hell in which the human being shares fully in the divinity, just as human and divine are one in Christ.

The bliss and the madness of love
Then cast them into the abyssal flood,
Unfathomable, ever living,
Which with life receives, in the unity of the trinity,

God and human in one single love:
Such is the trinity above all thought.

(Hadewijch, 'Poem in Couplets,' 16; Hart 1980: 357)

Love destroys those who fall in love with love and they
then . . . wander in the storms of Love,
Body and soul, heart and thought—
Lovers lost in hell.

(Hadewijch, 'Poem in Couplets,' 16; Hart 1980: 358)

Satisfaction occurs only in its renunciation; the suffering humanity is eternally one with the divine. Hadewijch suggests, as does her contemporary Bonaventure, that Christ's incarnation was inevitable, the necessary consequence of God's nature as love—but she also lifts his suffering humanity into the eternal life of the trinity, an eternal life in which the human being, through her imitation of Christ, comes to share. Christ's hellish suffering is not only in God, then, but *is* God; it is love as God is love and it can never be escaped in its simultaneous joyfulness and torment.

Like Bonaventure's Francis, Hadewijch is eternally wounded. Bonaventure himself does not emphasize the suffering entailed in Francis's wounds; instead he focuses on the movement through the human to the cosmic Christ, an ascent Christ's grace enables Francis and those who follow Francis to achieve. There is no more suffering in these heights, but only joy and praise for the God who is love. Hadewijch asks, more boldly and arguably more coherently, about the wounded human being held up by the seraph. In the penultimate of her visions, she too sees a seraph, or rather, the face of God that is also that of love and of the God-human, Christ, upheld by six wings. The vision is complex and its interpretation subject to debate. What is clear is that the lowest of the wings, which Hadewijch describes last and which in their lowliness are the highest, are those of 'the highest unfaith,' the perpetual movement of a desire that cannot be satisfied. Hadewijch's victory, described in the last of her visions, is premised on the continued conjoining of human and divine, on the taking up of Christ's wounded humanity and the wounded humanity of those who follow him, into the Trinity. And these wounds, these wounded beings, continually trouble any narrative, any theology, that promises a final and eternal peace.

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CHAPTER 26

PNEUMATOLOGY

BRANDON GALLAHER

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit

(2 Corinthians 3: 18 [RSV])

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY TO THE SPIRIT?

MORE than any other topic of systematic theology, pneumatology seems to be naturally bound up with Christian mysticism. Indeed, at least one traditional understanding of the field of ‘spirituality’ is that it consists in the study of so-called ‘spiritual writers’ or ‘mystics’. These mystical writers are often thought to have a unique, even rarefied, experience of the Holy Spirit, which is ineffable and unmediated but also wholly universal linking them to pneumatics in all ages regardless of their specific history and doctrine. That is to say, they are said to have had an immediate vision of God, a particular *sui generis* consciousness, even speak in certain distinct ways and possess particular *rare* spiritual gifts that set them apart from the run of the mill ‘unspiritual’ Christian.

From the thirteenth century onwards there was, as Michel de Certeau (1925–86) famously argued, a turn away from the traditional ecclesial vision of the mystical or *mustikos* being connected to Christian initiation into the ‘holy mysteries’ of the liturgy and scripture by which, following the Dionysian Corpus (fifth–sixth century), the human being ascends to God understood as the unspeakable (Waaïjman 2002: 355). Then at the dawn of the modern era, in the late sixteenth century, ‘a new epistemological “form”’ appeared with texts that were characterized as ‘mystical’, distinguished from other texts whether they were biblical commentaries or theological treatises (de Certeau 1995: 16). Attention is paid to certain ‘extraordinary’ individuals or ‘mystics’ (later called ‘mystical

doctors'), not so much saints as adepts of the interior life, enigmatic and mysterious in their soul's inwardness and fervent feelings, who teach an 'extraordinary', 'experimental', 'affective', and 'practical' doctrine gleaned from a close analysis of their visions or prophecies and peculiar actions and language (de Certeau 1995: 76, 107, and see Waaijman 2002: 359). A new science of 'mysticism' develops to order and systematize all these varied phenomena chronicled in various texts and it 'produced its discursive forms, specified its procedures, articulated its own itineraries or "experiences," and attempted to isolate its object' (de Certeau 1995: 76). A phenomenon that was once ecclesial and reflected the 'theological institution' (de Certeau 1995: 107) comes to be alienated from its own sources. Yet in little more than a century, the whole colossus fell by its own weight since it was 'never anything but the unstable metaphor for what is inaccessible' (de Certeau 1995: 77). It left in its wake the perception that mysticism either deals with religious mania and superstition or supernatural athletes divorced from the life of the ordinary Christian (see Waaijman 2002: 356).

THE MYSTICAL: THE ORDINARY- EXTRAORDINARY PATH OF TRANSFORMATION IN THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

It is this approach to mystical theology and mysticism that I want to avoid in this chapter. It is not just due to the undeniably exceptional nature of the mystic's 'experience' that they play a unique role within Christian tradition but because historically and theologically from a Christian perspective the witness of these saints and spiritual/mystical writers points to the very source of new life in Christ by the will of the Father: the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. I shall argue in this chapter that in the main line of Christian tradition in East and West the mystical is the universal, uncreated, and ordinary-extraordinary presence of the Holy Spirit throughout creation who dwells, in particular, in human beings as his chosen vessels of divine glory. This Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of freedom, and in him all human beings are called to behold a vision of the glory of the Lord in the image and likeness of Jesus and, in seeing this radiation of sanctification, the human being who beholds it can become transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3: 17–18) so that they reflect and become as Christ himself, simultaneously truly human and truly divine, fully alive. The saints and mystical writers, more simply 'theologians' proper, are simply those people who testify to the power of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. They witness to this ordinary-extraordinary transformative path of the Spirit of Christ, the path of divinization, to become 'christs' in Christ, open to all creation.

Mysticism and 'mystics' like Teresa of Avila (1515–82) are, then, quite ordinary in the Christian experience, as Karl Rahner (1904–84) argued, insofar as what is remarkable or extraordinary is the holy 'mystical foundation' of holiness of human existence in which

the transforming Spirit dwells (Rahner 1993: 362). A human being as spirit is founded on and for and towards God in Christ through the Spirit of Christ and towards the transforming vision of God. As Basil the Great (329–79) writes of the Holy Spirit,

All things thirsting for holiness turn to Him; everything living in virtue never turns away from Him. He waters them with His life-giving breath and helps them reach their proper fulfillment. He perfects all other things, and Himself lacks nothing [...] He is the source [*genesis*] of sanctification, spiritual light, who gives illumination to everyone using His powers to search for the truth—and the illumination He gives is Himself.

(*On the Holy Spirit*, 9.22; Pruche 1968: 324–5/Anderson 2001: 43; on Basil see van Rossum 2011: 25–8)

If, as Rahner claimed, mysticism is part of the basic trajectory of the human then the witness of mystical writers is, unsurprisingly, echoed early on in the worship and hymnography of the Church and so it is, as it were, the open secret of the saints to which all Christians are called. Theology, and mystical theology, in particular, simply cannot be separated—without hermeneutic violence—from spirituality (see McIntosh 1998). All Christians, according to this line of argument, are called to live out the mystical existence, which is the theological existence, by their baptism into Christ and their chrismation/confirmation through the Spirit by the will of the Father. To adapt a famous verse (Num. 11: 29): ‘Would that all the Lord’s people were mystics, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!’ Moreover, if all theology is a living out of the spiritual path, life in Christ through the Spirit, the path of transformation, then all theology is mystical for all Christians are called to the contemplation, experience, and expression of the divine mysteries (Lossky 1991: 8–9).

This approach to ‘mystical theology’ is one that is taken for granted in much of Eastern Orthodoxy, though the whole corpus of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) shows its ecumenical thrust. It is my hope that I can show in Western writers, through comparing them to a variety of Eastern theologians, the ecclesial—i.e. mainstream—and ecumenical character of mystical theology in East and West, precisely because it points to the common message of the Church in East and West which is the call to the ordinary-extraordinary path of becoming transformed into Christ through the Spirit of God. I will trace this ecclesial character of mystical theology, developing through the mystical writers a pneumatology which will trace the difficulty of talking about the Spirit as he ‘hides himself’ and always kenotically puts the other persons of the Trinity forward as well as leads the Christian into a flourishing of their personhood. I will look at the following aspects of pneumatology: the Christoform shape of the Spirit; the Spirit’s role in nourishing growth or transformation into Christ; how the Spirit leads the Christian into illumination and deification, conformity to Christ, and is the means by which the Trinity is stamped on the soul, allowing the soul to see the things of the spiritual world; and lastly how the Spirit is the author of the Body of Christ in which Christians are called to put on Christ, living lives headed by the Spirit, as inheritors of the divine nature.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DISCERNING THE SPIRIT

There is something especially ‘difficult’ in the doctrine of the Spirit (Congar 1983; Kärkkäinen 2002, 2010; Wainwright 1997; Rogers 2005, 2009), as Gregory Nazianzen (330–90) pointed out (*Oration* 31.2; Williams and Wickham 2002: 117). It was comparatively late in Church history (late fourth century) and due to the work of Gregory himself that we begin to have widespread explicit and unambiguous assertions of the fact that the Spirit is not only divine but with the Father and the Son equally and truly ‘God’. Gregory tells us that the old covenant made known the Father but the Son was only known in it through shadows and by types. Then in the new covenant the Son was made manifest but we have only had a glimpse of the Spirit’s Godhead (*Or.* 31.26; Williams and Wickham 2002: 137) and that has come through a slow realization of his presence in our midst as the Church where from age to age he gradually gives us a clearer manifestation of himself. Indeed, there are certain truths, Jesus said, his disciples could not yet bear, amongst which was ‘the *Godhead* of the Spirit, which becomes clear at a later stage, when the knowledge is timely and capable of being taken in’: ‘light shines on us bit by bit’ (*Or.* 31.27; Williams and Wickham 2002: 138; cf. Florensky 1997: 83–91, 99–101). But why might it be so difficult to discern the character of the Spirit?

Vladimir Lossky (1903–58) observed that some of the difficulty of speaking about the Spirit is that he is the only divine person whose image is not made known in another. The divine persons make themselves known by bearing witness to one another. The Father thus is imaged in the Son who is his perfect image (Col. 1: 15) and the Spirit is the image of the Son in that he makes known the Son as the ‘Spirit of Christ’ (Rom. 8: 9) and ‘Spirit of the Lord’ (2 Cor. 3: 17). Thus Jesus says in John, ‘But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me’ (John 15: 26). The Spirit ‘remains unmanifested, hidden, concealing himself in his very appearing’ (Lossky 1991: 160). Indeed, when we hear about the Spirit, it is usually through his transformative effects and his relationship to the other persons. The Holy Spirit is the one whom Jesus calls ‘living water’ (John 7: 38–40; cf. Num. 20: 2–13, Isa. 12: 3 and 44: 3, 55:1), ‘the Spirit of truth’ (John 14: 16–17; cf. 1 John 5: 7), and ‘the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name’ (John 14: 26). Now the Son sends the Spirit (John 15: 26) but he does this in consort with the Father (John 14: 26) and so the Spirit proceeds (at least in the divine economy) from them both as from one source. We see this when Jesus breathes on his disciples (‘Receive the Holy Spirit’: John 20: 22) and by the fact that it is in the Son’s name that the Father sends the Spirit (John 14: 26) who witnesses to him (John 15: 26).

We see this curious unconcealed concealing of the Spirit, known but unknown through the other persons and through his effects, in the opening of one of the classics

of Eastern Christian mystical writings, *Hymns of Divine Love* by Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), where Symeon invokes the Spirit:

Come, true light (John 1: 9). Come, eternal life (1 John 5: 20). Come, hidden mystery (Eph. 3: 9). Come, nameless treasure. Come, ineffable reality. Come, incomprehensible face. Come, everlasting exultation. Come, unfading light. Come, trusty expectation of all who are saved. Come, awakening of those who sleep. Come, resurrection of the dead (John 11: 25). Come, Mighty One who always creates, who re-creates and who transforms all things by his will alone. Come, invisible, and untouchable, and in every way intangible. Come, You Who always remain immutable, and Who at every hour are wholly altered, and are coming to us who lie in hell, You who are above all the heavens (Eph. 4: 10). Come, most beloved name repeated again and again, a name entirely forbidden for us to speak or to know the very person You are, the kind or quality. Come, eternal joy. Come, imperishable crown (1 Pet. 5: 4). Come purple of our great God and King. Come, crystalline cincture set with gems. Come, unapproachable sandal. Come, royal, purple robe and truly autocratic right hand!... Come my breath and my life (Acts 17: 25)... I thank You because You have become one spirit with me (1 Cor. 6: 17), unmixing, unmoved, immutable God over all things... For You have never been hidden from anyone, but we always hide ourselves from You, not wishing to come to You. For where would You hide, You who nowhere have a place to rest? Why would You hide? You who never turn away anyone at all, and You do not turn from anyone of them. And so now Master, dwell in me and inhabit me, and remain continually inseparable in me your slave, until my death, Good One, so that I also may be found both in my departure and after my departure in You (Phil. 3: 9), Good One, and I shall reign with You (2 Tim. 2: 12), God over all things!

(*Divine Eros: Hymns*, 'Mystical Prayer'; Griggs 2010: 33–4 and see Greek text at Koder 1969–73)

Symeon at first invokes the Spirit as a 'hidden mystery' and eternal 'nameless treasure' who, in one of the best known prayers in Eastern Orthodoxy, is 'present everywhere, filling all things' ('The Trisagion Prayers'; McGuckin 2008: 338 and see van Rossum 2011: 28–30). But as his invocation goes onwards we see that many of the things which he denotes the Spirit with, such as creation and redemption or re-creation (Col. 1: 15–20), are also things which we only receive through Christ himself. Indeed, the Spirit is called the 'resurrection of the dead' by Symeon when we know that it is Christ himself who takes this name (John 11: 25). Symeon tells the Spirit that he will be found in him or will have his going out and returning in the Spirit (Phil. 3: 9), reign with him (2 Tim. 2: 12) and refers to him as 'God over all things' (Rom. 9: 5). Likewise, the Spirit is said to be the royal purple, and the right hand of God, the divine crown and even the sandals mentioned by John the Baptist (John 1: 27). All of these things are identified with Christ, as the King, the Pantocrator. Symeon is not playing the Spirit over against Christ. What he is showing, and I shall elaborate this in this chapter, is that the Spirit is the 'Spirit of Christ' (Rom. 8: 9) who comes from the Father and he holds that as Christians we only

have new life in Christ through the Spirit when he dwells in us uniting with our spirits. The Spirit is said never to 'hide' but we hide from him. Yet because he is everywhere present, for the unilluminated, he is nowhere, effectively hidden in plain sight. To use Symeon's language, he 'dwells' in us (or should we say 'hides'?) and clothes us and makes us as Christ. The saints and mystics—persons in the transformative process of salvation or deification—then are the place where Christians see the face of the Spirit and it is the face of Christ who shows us the Father.

THE KENOSIS OF THE SPIRIT

Who bears witness to the Spirit? No other divine person. Rather, he kenotically empties himself and his very person is hidden, mysterious, unmanifested, concealed, for he exists for Christians as one who is the bearer of the truth that comes ultimately from the Father of Christ. He incorporates us into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 12–13) and clothes us in his resurrection (Rom. 8: 11). The Spirit is hidden precisely because he is the personal medium of the spiritual life, the transformation of the human being into adopted sons and daughters of God through the Son of God, 'Christs'. The one 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17: 28), as Symeon reminds us. Indeed, in Hebrew, 'spirit' is *ruah*—wind or breath—and in Greek *pneuma* has the same sense and so we have this elusiveness of the wind (John 3: 8).

The Spirit, according to this sort of Christian theological view, is something that at first one can only know by its effects just as at dawn when the sun rises over the mountains one sees all of the world illumined through the sun's rays but not the source of the illumination nor the rays themselves. The disk or orb of the sun only comes at sunrise. So too the person of the Spirit himself will only be known face to face at the dawn of the Kingdom (Florensky 1992: 81, 92). Thus, there is an absence of the 'personal revelation' of the Spirit. In scripture and tradition, one sees much about the hypostatic action of the Spirit, the grace sent to illumine human beings (e.g. in prophecy), but this 'grace-bestowing action' is impersonal and is not the same thing as the unique 'personal word' of the Spirit, the 'Holy Spirit himself or his personal presence'. The Spirit remains shrouded in mystery in this age, but revealed through the gifts he gives to the saints, the cloud of witnesses to Christ, through the Church as a perpetual Pentecost (Bulgakov 2004: 173–5).

Lossky put this well using an Eastern liturgical image when he observed that the Spirit is the 'sovereign unction' or 'Chrism' that rests upon the King, Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son with whom he is well pleased (Matt. 3: 16–17, Luke 3: 21–2) and that it is through him that Christians, as those who are anointed in chrismation as little 'Christs' immediately after baptism, are called to 'reign with him in the age to come. It is then that this divine Person, now unknown, not having his image in another Hypostasis, will manifest himself in deified persons: for the multitude of the saints will be his image' (Lossky 1991: 173). The Spirit is the 'light of God's face' (Bulgakov 2008: 50) and between the times, the saints, the 'mystics' give a brief glimpse of the face of the Spirit.

THE SPIRIT SHINING IN THE FACE OF THE SAINT: THE CASE OF SERAPHIM OF SAROV

This shining of the Spirit in the transformed faces of the saints who move from glory to glory as they put on Christ can be seen particularly well in the celebrated Russian spiritual teacher St Seraphim of Sarov (1754 (or 1759)–1833) (Kontzevitch 2004 and de Beausobre 1996). Seraphim was a late eighteenth-century–early nineteenth-century hermit and practitioner of hesychastic prayer near Sarov in the central part of European Russia. During the years of Seraphim's monastic training he had various visions of Mary accompanied by the Apostles, angels, and finally of Jesus himself. During one such vision as a deacon serving in the church, he says that all of a sudden he was 'illuminated by a ray of light, as it were from the sun; and when I looked at the light I saw Our Lord and God Jesus Christ appearing like the Son of Man in glory and radiating indescribable light, surrounded by the heavenly host, angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim, as many as a swarm of bees' (Chichagov 1903: 56 in Ware and Shukman 2018: 50). This light imagery, typical of older hesychastic literature, is quite common but it pervades the accounts of Seraphim's teaching where the transformative energy or gracious power of the Holy Spirit is often described as fire, the sun, and light (Chichagov 1903: 113–14, 122, 126 in Ware and Shukman 2018: 103–4, 111, 114–15). We are likewise told that if we are to receive the eternal light of God and 'feel' it with our 'hearts' we must turn from visible and sensuous things and plunge the mind into the heart and cry out to God with the Jesus Prayer (Chichagov 1903: 126 in Ware and Shukman 2018: 114). Furthermore, it is said regularly by his disciples that he was illuminated by uncreated light sometimes accompanied by the saints, especially the Mother of God who called him her 'favourite one' and 'beloved' and treated him as one of the saints, a Spirit bearer (Chichagov 1903: 323ff., 362, 389 in Ware and Shukman 2018: 293ff., 329, 352). The most famous example of identification of light and the Spirit with a Christoform life is (in longer and shorter recensions) 'A Conversation of St Seraphim of Sarov with Nicholas Motovilov Concerning the Aim of the Christian Life' (see Shukman 2005: 47–57 and Strizhev 1999) where Seraphim has a dialogue in the snowy woods with a disciple, the merchant Motovilov (1809–79).

Seraphim begins the conversation by saying that prayer, fasting, vigils, and all other good Christian acts such as alms giving are not the aim of the Christian life but are simply a means to its main end: 'to acquire the Holy Spirit of God' (Jones 1973: 42 [shorter version]). Seraphim says that Christians in acquiring the Spirit which is grace-giving and eternal are like smart business people acquiring capital for future investment. Virtuous acts performed for the sake of Christ confers on one's soul the grace of the Holy Spirit just as selling earthly goods attains capital. The fire of the grace of the Holy Spirit which is like light 'prepares in our soul and body a throne for the all-creative presence of God' just as Paul says the human being becomes a 'temple of the living God', quoting Leviticus (2 Cor. 6: 16; Lev. 26: 12) (Jones 1973: 44–5, 46).

We are reminded here of Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (1577) (see Tyler and Howells 2017), of how in prayer, in the hiddenness of stillness, the soul is united with God like a silkworm weaving around itself a cocoon from which emerges a butterfly. The silkworms require nourishment before they spin silk around themselves making tight little cocoons, in which they 'bury themselves,' and they get this from mulberry leaves upon which they feed until they are full grown. The soul, in a manner akin to the silkworm, takes 'heat which comes from the Holy Spirit' given to it by God but this is given to it by the 'remedies' for its sins and temptations God left in the Church, including good books, sermons, frequent confession with obediences and penance, and all other good works. Through these divine aids the soul 'begins to live and nourishes itself on this food, and on good meditations, until it is full-grown' (*Interior Castle*, 5.2; Peers 1961: 104–6 and Alvarez 1998) and then having spun its house it enters in to die. But what is this house? We will return later to Teresa's image to answer this question.

Returning to the *Conversation*, Motovilov asks how and where he can see the Spirit in the world and himself: 'How am I to know whether he is with me or not?' Seraphim says that humans have wandered from the Spirit-filled state of the early Christians which was like Eden where human beings literally saw, walked, and held conversation with God (Gen. 3: 8): 'Men saw God and the grace of his Holy Spirit, not in sleep or in a dream, or in the excitement of a disordered imagination, but truly, in the light of day' (Jones 1973: 47). The extraordinary experience of God in Eden and in the early Church was quite ordinary! After his resurrection, Jesus gave to his Apostles by breathing on them the ordinary-extraordinary mystical power of the Holy Spirit, the light which enlightens all. The Spirit which was lost by Adam is available once again to all in the Church in baptism and chrismation through 'The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Jones 1973: 48: this liturgical formula is pronounced during chrismation in the Byzantine rite). We have simply become dead to its presence. Moreover, wherever the Spirit is, there likewise is the Father and the Son so that in baptism and chrismation we have the whole Trinity, the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us (see Plekon 2013: 5 and 10 n. 5): 'The grace of the Holy Spirit, given at Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, continues to shine in our heart as divine light in spite of our falls and the darkness of our soul. It is this grace that cries in us to the Father: "Abba, Father!" [Rom. 8: 15] and who reclothes the soul in the incorruptible garment woven for us by the Holy Spirit' (Zander 1975: 89 [long version]).

The Apostles, Seraphim claims, 'were consciously aware of the presence in themselves of God's Spirit'. Yet Motovilov is still not convinced by this mystical witness from scripture and tradition and he asks how he can recognize the 'true manifestation' of the Spirit (Jones 1973: 51). Here Seraphim takes Motovilov firmly by the shoulders so he too in his ordinary life can see and experience the extraordinary divine Spirit as he, Seraphim, sees him all the time: 'We are both together, son, in the Spirit of God! Why lookest thou on me?' Upon being touched by Seraphim, Motovilov claims he immediately saw Seraphim and then himself, like Moses (Exod. 34: 29–35) descending from Horeb, Christ on Thabor, and numerous Desert Fathers (Florensky 1997: 73–7), shining with uncreated divine light: "I cannot look, father, because lightning flashes from your eyes" ... "Fear

not, my son; you too have become as bright as I. You too are now in the fullness of God's Spirit; otherwise you would not be able to look on me as I am" (Jones 1973: 51). According to Seraphim, it is not only the mystic saint who shines with the Holy Spirit but every Christian, as one of God's people, the saints, who are simply what we often call 'mystics.'

The 'uncreated divine light' related by Motovilov is the Holy Spirit and its experience through the 'spiritual senses' (on this tradition: Gavriilyuk and Coakley 2012 and McInroy 2014) is at the heart of hesychasm or the tradition of the 'prayer of the heart' (or 'mental prayer') in Eastern Orthodoxy. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) in the 'Hagioritic Tome' (1340) argued that the intellect perceives one light which is uncreated and the senses another created light. Sight and intellect, he says, do not ordinarily perceive the same light, but each 'operates to the limit of its nature in what is natural to it'. Now the saints are those possessed of spiritual 'grace and power' and they can uniquely see both created and uncreated light with the 'sense of sight and with the intellect' in a union that 'surpasses both sense and intellect' ('The Declaration of the Holy Mountain in Defense of Those who Devoutly Practice a Life of Stillness,' §6; Palmer et al. 1979–95: iv. 424; and Theodoropoulos 1957–63). Symeon the New Theologian writes likewise: 'How shall I describe, Master, the vision of your face, / how shall I tell the unutterable contemplation of your beauty? / ... And so as I began, Master, meditating on these things, / suddenly You appeared from above, much greater than the sun, / and You shone from the heavens down as far as my heart, (2 Cor. 4: 6) ... Oh awesome wonder seen doubly with the double eyes of both body and soul!' (*Divine Eros: Hymns*, 25, ll.1–2, 9–11, 60–1; Griggs 2010: 194–6; cf. *The Discourses*, 28.4; de Catanzaro 1980: 298 (where Christ is light)).

Seraphim tells Motovilov that he had been praying 'mentally' to God that Motovilov might see 'clearly with bodily eyes' the descent of the Spirit upon them, the light of the glory of God (Jones 1973: 52). Motovilov then claims that though they are sitting in the ordinary snowy woods in the middle of winter he feels an extraordinary warmth like a flame in the snow and smells an unearthly fragrance. He is told that not only is he seeing and feeling the Holy Spirit but he is smelling the 'fragrance of God's Holy Spirit' (Jones 1973: 55) who is the interior Kingdom, the hidden promise of a new transfigured creation, transforming them from within (Jones 1973: 56). In a 1933 homily titled 'The Flaming Coal: Oration on the Centenary of the Passing of St Seraphim of Sarov', the great Russian theologian Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) said that Seraphim was a 'spirit-bearer' chosen by Mary as the Mother of God who is *the* Spirit-Bearer who appeared to him with the saints more frequently than to any other saint as she recognized him as one of her own kind who manifests the glory (i.e. the Spirit) of the Kingdom: 'That light of Tabor in which the Lord manifested His glory to His disciples by the action of the Holy Spirit and which He manifests to His chosen, was manifested by St. Seraphim to his spiritual friend, to whom he showed an image of the transfiguration of the world, the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, under the action of the Holy Spirit, here, on earth' (Bulgakov 2008: 46–7). Thus, like Symeon before him, we see in Seraphim that the face of the Spirit is revealed by his indwelling in the saint or mystic who, in putting

on Christ, conforming himself to Christ through the life of the Spirit through fasting, vigils, prayer, and almsgiving, reveals God with his Kingdom that is to come shining from his life, deeds, and (literally) face.

THE 'SPIRIT OF CHRIST' AND THE SAINT AS 'SECOND CHRIST'

As Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) noted on the *Conversation* in a 1963 letter, we must avoid the temptation of playing 'pneumatic' over against 'Christological'. The story of Seraphim and Motovilov is ultimately one showing us how Christ and the Spirit find their right balance in spiritual life. One can never have the Spirit without Christ since the Spirit and his gifts 'can be acquired only in the name of Christ' (Gallaher and Ladouceur 2019: 237). In the order of salvation, there is no higher name than Christ, for you only can address the Father God in Christ's name. But the calling of 'Abba! Father!' (Rom. 8: 15) by us can only be itself in and through his Spirit, the 'Spirit of Christ' (Rom. 8: 9 and see Coakley 2013: 111–15), for 'Pentecost is the mystery of the Crucified Lord, Who rose again to send the Paraclete', realizing his living and salvific body through his saints (Gallaher and Ladouceur 2019: 238).

Seraphim, then, is another or second Christ (*alter Christus*), akin to Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) (see Van Os 1974 and de Campagnola 1971). As Christians, being baptized into the body of Christ, through one's participation in his death and life through the Spirit, one is potentially transformed into another Christ (*Christianus alter Christus*). This is expressed neatly by Angelus Silesius (c.1624–77): 'Because my savior once welcomed humanity / I too now sit, in him, at God's right hand like he' (*The Wanderer*, 1.220; Pelz 2001: 21). Through the Spirit, shining in glory in the deeds and physical body of the saint or mystic, one has Christ not only in his head but also his body (Gallaher and Ladouceur 2019: 238). As Augustine (354–430) put it: 'For Christ is not in the head *or* in the body, but Christ is wholly in the head *and* in the body' (*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 28.1; Rettig 1993: 3, *PL* 35.1622). To return to Teresa of Avila's image, she tells us that the silkworm that feeds on nourishment in its cocoon so that it eventually is transformed into a butterfly is an image of the soul feeding on the warmth of the Spirit through the divine ecclesial aids given it whose life is hid in Christ in God (Col. 3: 3). Its house or cocoon *is Christ* ('he will be our Mansion') (*Interior Castle*, 5.2; Peers 1961: 105) so that, as Rowan Williams observes about Teresa, 'we are in fact spinning a cocoon around ourselves: by emptying the self we "build" Christ around us' (Williams 1991: 128). The soul is 'hidden in the greatness of God and closely united with him' and when it emerges from this suspension of the Prayer of Quiet, the presence of Christ *in God*, becoming perfect in its love for the neighbour and so truly loving God, it is transformed into a 'little white butterfly', a new being in Christ through his Spirit (*Interior Castle*, 5.2;

Peers 1961: 105–6, 114–17) just as with Seraphim we see that through the acquisition of the Spirit, the life of the prayer of the heart, cultivating quietude, one is transformed into a second or another Christ.

THE SPIRIT AS DIVINIZER: THE CASE OF JOHN OF THE CROSS

This revelation of the Spirit in the deified human being who is transformed into Christ in our midst is also seen in one of the great classics of Western mystical writing: St John of the Cross (1481–1534) (see Howells 2002). We learn as much in John about the nature of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity as we do about theosis. There is no opposition in him of ‘spirituality’/‘mysticism’ and doctrinal theology (A. N. Williams 2014: 523).

The mystical ordinary-extraordinary process of union or deification, for John, is articulated in the form of God’s transformation of the soul through his embrace and wounding of it in the fire of love as Bride to a Bridegroom whereby the Trinity is revealed at its core and the soul is shown to be as if it were God himself in its union. The imagery is erotic unlike in the case of Seraphim—God is even shown to be vulnerable in an inspired love chase of Bride with Bridegroom—but once again, like Seraphim, we see how the Spirit plays a crucial role in conforming the human person to God in Christ and that this involves a transformation: a transfiguration, a becoming light by light. For in Christ’s light one shall see and be light.

We learn from John that ‘The power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God himself’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 599 and see López-Baralt and Pacho 1991). The love which John speaks of is the love of the soul or Bride for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as the ‘Bridegroom’, but this love is divine since the Son of God ‘is the principal lover’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 12.2–3, 31.2; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 516, 596) and the ‘living flame of love’ is the Holy Spirit (of which more later) (*The Living Flame of Love*, 1.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 641). John’s *Spiritual Canticle* (1584), inspired by the *Song of Songs* medieval commentary tradition, is dedicated to the soul and her Bridegroom. God is said to be aroused at the soul who is compared with a woman with flowing hair (*Spiritual Canticle*, 31; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 475 and see 595ff.).

God, John says, gazes at the ‘hair’, which is the soul’s love, fluttering at its neck and is ‘captivated’ and sees her ‘eye’, that is, her faith, and her ‘single-hearted fidelity’ so touches him that the ‘eyes of her faith so tighten . . . the bonds of his captivity as to cause a wound of love’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 31.2–9; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 596–8). God is the ‘prisoner’ of the soul and he ‘is surrendered to all her desires . . . those who act with love and friendship toward him will make him do all they desire . . . by love they bind him with one hair’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 599). Yet no

credit is due to the soul in attracting the love of God in Christ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 599–601) through its love since he first loved his creation in creating it and then in redeeming it by taking flesh because of it (*Spiritual Canticle*, 31.8; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 598).

The soul is so elevated by God's love which graciously makes her pleasing to him ('By infusing his grace in the soul, God makes it worthy and capable of his love') (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32.5; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 600) that she is united, indeed, divinized ('make her his equal') (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32.6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 600) by that love which joins and binds the soul and God that 'it unites and transforms them... that even though they differ in substance, in glory and appearance the soul seems to be God and God seems to be the soul' (*Spiritual Canticle*, 31.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 595). God loves the soul in Christ and because in Christ, as the Son of God, he loves it 'in himself, with himself, that is, with the very love by which he loves himself' and this is the Holy Trinity itself (*Spiritual Canticle*, 32.6 and see 39.4; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 600 and see 623).

John teaches that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and Spirit is hidden by his essence, he is present in the 'innermost being of the soul' (*Spiritual Canticle*, 1.6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 481 and see *Living Flame*, 1.15 and 4.14; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 646, 713). This Trinitarian mark to the soul in Christ is explored in John's poem and commentary, *The Living Flame of Love* (1591), which is 'Stanzas the Soul Recites in Intimate Union with God' (*Living Flame*, prologue, 4; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 639). The soul insofar as it draws near to God, finds God at its centre, is glorified by the flame of love, and left with the impression of God as Trinity in its inner being. That which marks the soul, wounds it, deifies it, is love itself, the 'living flame of love' of the poem title who is the Holy Spirit as the 'Spirit of its Bridegroom', Christ (*Living Flame*, prologue 2 and stanza 1, 1–3; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 639, 641):

O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! If it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

(*Living Flame*, Stanza 1; Kavanaugh and
Rodriguez 1991: 641)

The centre of the soul is found through the Spirit of God, love itself. When the soul has reached God with the full 'capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination' it then finds its final and deepest centre in God himself as Trinity and knows, loves, and takes joy in God who is itself (*Living Flame*, 1.12; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 645). The veil of mortal life is torn aside by the encounter with the flame of the Spirit (*Living Flame*, 1.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 641) and it raises up the soul to the 'activity of God in God' (*Living Flame*, 1.4; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 642). The

soul now in its workaday world lives in God spiritually and experiences the extraordinary life of God in himself becoming 'transformed into a flame of love in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are communicated to it' and, without confusion of the divine and the human, it enjoys 'a foretaste of eternal life' (*Living Flame*, 1.6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 643 and compare Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 7.1; Peers 1961: 209–10 and Plekon 2013: 4–5).

This state is the state of union, for 'love unites it with God' (*Living Flame*, 1.13; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 645). The Christian, like St Paul, can say 'that he does not live but Christ lives in Him. [Gal. 2: 20] In accord with this likeness and transformation, we can say that his life and Christ's were one life through union of love' (*Spiritual Canticle*, 12.8; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 518). In this state, the soul is wounded at its centre and by this wounding it is illuminated, radiated in its being with light, the flame of love, the Spirit, which 'transforms it in its whole being, power, and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God'. John uses the image of a pure and clean crystal that has light shone upon it. The more intense the degree of light shining on the crystal then the more light the crystal has concentrated within it and the brighter it becomes so that it can become 'so brilliant from the abundance of light received that it seems to be all light. And then the crystal is undistinguishable from the light, since it is illumined according to its full capacity which is to be appear to be light', that is, the crystal *seems* to be God himself (*Living Flame*, 1.13; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991: 645). One is reminded here of the accounts of Seraphim and Symeon on the saint or mystic shining with the light of the Spirit as if she were transparent. As Basil the Great writes: 'When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others' (*On the Holy Spirit*, 9.23; Pruche 1968: 328–9/Anderson 2001: 44). The saint or mystic in being brought out into the ordinary-extraordinary path of transformation becomes transparent by the Spirit and becomes a second Christ in our midst with the Holy Trinity ('the Kingdom') dwelling within us irradiating and warming those who come near them like a flame in the snow.

BAPTISM AND THE DESCENT OF THE SPIRIT: THE OPEN SECRET OF THE SAINTS

It might be thought at this point that I have contradicted the argument I set out at the beginning that 'mysticism' is not about the experience of certain unique mystical adepts but it is the ordinary-extraordinary open secret of the saints, all God's people as 'mystics'. In fact, what we have just seen about pneumatology and its links to Christology and deification in Symeon, Seraphim, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross is underlined by a reading of sacramental theology where all alike participate in Christ through his Spirit.

Salvation, accomplished first through the cross and resurrection, can be understood as the deifying work of Jesus Christ realized in and through his living Body, the Church, but effected ultimately by his Spirit at Pentecost creating the saving Body of the Church by the will of the Father. This gift is given (at least partially) through various sacramental actions, above all through the Sacrament of Baptism, which is traditionally understood as the well-spring of the Church. In short, the mystical life is the sacramental inheritance of all Christians who live through the Spirit of Christ, even if this is only actualized in its fullness by a few 'mystics'.

Baptism, which is in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2: 38; cf. 19: 5 and 1 Cor. 1: 12–15) and the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6: 11), that is, Trinitarian baptism (Matt. 28: 19), is a new birth 'of water and the Spirit' (John 3: 5) granting not only forgiveness of sins but also the gift of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 6: 1–4), as can be seen from Christ's own baptism (Matt. 3: 13–17; Mark 1: 9–11; Luke 3: 21–2; John 1: 31–4). No longer is one headed by the devil as sons of the old man but in baptism one becomes, in the Christian understanding, headed by the new man Jesus Christ through his Spirit (cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. Haer.* 5.20.2, Rousseau et al. 1965–82: 260). The image of Christ, that is, the image of God in whom one was made, is renewed in being conformed to the pattern of Christ's death on the cross. But in becoming conformed to his death one hopes as a Christian in like manner to become partakers of his resurrection and preserving the gift of the Spirit, increasing the grace given to one as a talent, one might receive the high calling and be numbered with the first-born whose names are written in heaven in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour. In short, in becoming one with Jesus Christ in baptism, that is, in putting on Christ by baptism (Gal. 3: 27), Christians believe they become children of God, 'christs' in Christ by adoption by the Father through the anointed seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, as Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313–86) says on chrismation: 'Now that you have been baptized and have put on Christ, you have been shaped to the likeness of the Son of God. . . . You have become christs now that you have received the sacramental sign of the Holy Spirit' ('Mystagogic Catechesis 3: Concerning the Anointing with Chrism', 1; Yarnold 2000: 176).

But this renewal of the Christian's being in the Spirit, as an adoption by the Father in Christ through the Spirit, which is baptism, is not, as Alexander Schmemmann (1921–83) observed, simply an isolated 'affair between the priest and the baptizand' (Schmemmann 1995: 42), for, in baptism and then chrismation, the whole Church is renewed through the Spirit as the Body of God. The fact that the Church itself is renewed in its being by each baptism as a permanent and personal Pentecost can be seen from one of the diaconal petitions of the Great Litany of the Order of Baptism in the Eastern Orthodox Church: 'That we may be illumined by the light of understanding and piety, and by the descent of the Holy Spirit' (Hapgood 1996: 276).

But how could baptism and chrismation not affect the Church since to be incorporated through the Spirit *into* Christ's body, which has many diverse members chosen by Christ himself who is its head, is covalent with being baptized *into* the Church? In other words, baptism cannot but be a corporate act since it is a form of incorporation! As the

first prayer for the Reception of the Catechumenate in the same Byzantine rite puts it: 'Inscribe him (her) in thy Book of Life, and unite him (her) to the flock of thine inheritance' (Hapgood 1996: 271). This is not simply a peculiar Eastern Christian emphasis. In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, we see the same basic ideas in its rite of infant baptism—albeit in an Augustinian key—of salvation being tied up in the action of the Spirit in baptism which is an incorporation into the Church. Baptism is said to be for the 'mystical washing away of sin' and 'spiritual regeneration' and the minister calls on God to 'wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost; that he being delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ's Church' and finally being faithful may come to everlasting life (Book of Common Prayer 1918: 293–4).

THE CHURCH AS THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE EUCHARIST

Continuing with this grounding of mystical theology and pneumatology in the basics of sacramental life, we see that Christians are baptized so that in the waters and in their anointing and their reception of the bread of heaven, they might thereby receive the Holy Spirit and become living and, indeed priestly (1 Pet. 1: 22–2: 10), members of Christ's own Church growing into the full stature of Jesus Christ, drinking of 'one Spirit' to become one Body of many members (1 Cor. 12: 13–14; cf. 12: 27, Gal. 3: 27–9). Furthermore, the apostles were sent off in the Great Commission by Christ to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28: 19) and this commandment was understood, in the light of Pentecost, as the incorporation of the baptizand into a community which, in its teaching, fellowship, breaking of the bread, and constant prayer, anticipated as a foretaste the Kingdom of the Coming One, Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God, as Paul wrote, is not a matter of food and wine but 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14: 17). Thus there is a deep connection between the ideas of the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom and this profound link is found in the liturgy and the sacraments, which are outward manifestations of the Kingdom of God in Church life. But the fullness of the acquisition of this Kingdom comes only through the Spirit (Florensky 1997: 101–2).

This vision of the Kingdom as intrinsically pneumatic and eucharistic can be seen in the baptism and subsequent life of the three thousand who were converted at Pentecost: 'So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2: 41–2). Baptism presupposes the eucharist as its crown (Schmemmann 1995: 116), for baptism is the door of the Church through which in participating in the eucharist one is given a foretaste of the Heavenly Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as Boris Bobrinskoy (b. 1925) writes:

The Eucharist is at once the advent of the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit which we reach by Trinitarian Baptism, and the place where the Church manifests herself and renews herself. Baptism is, therefore, at once the door of the new life, the gift of the Spirit, the source of Trinitarian grace and the door of the Church, in which Baptism is accomplished. (Bobrinskoy 1971: 128–9)

But all of this is to make a more fundamental point which is that it is impossible to extricate the persons of the Spirit, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and their Father. As Symeon the New Theologian observes, Jesus himself is the door to salvation (John 10: 7–9). In turn, the grace of the Spirit is the ‘key of knowledge’ to that door of salvation, eternal life which is given through faith, producing knowledge and understanding of the Father and Son through illumination, and opening our closed and veiled minds ‘through many parables and symbols ... as well as by clear proofs’. But one first sees this enlightening of one’s mind—given to one in the purification and illumination of baptism where one is born from on high and anew as a child of God—in Christ’s breathing on the disciples giving them the Spirit and the power to forgive sins (John 20: 22–3). Finally, the owner of the house is the Father in which there are many rooms (John 14:2). But one cannot come to him except through the Son (John 14: 6) and, as was said, one comes to the Son through the Spirit (John 15: 25, 16: 7, 13): ‘Do you see how through the Spirit, or, rather, in the Spirit, the Father and the Son are made known inseparably?’ (*The Discourses*, 33.3–6; de Catanzaro 1980: 341–4; for Greek see Krivochéine 1963–5).

AUGUSTINE AND THE REALIZATION OF THE ‘BODY OF THE ONE DOVE’

Yet is the position I have argued unique to the East? In fact, it is upheld by Augustine (354–430), perhaps the quintessential Western theologian, who holds that the ordinary-extraordinary Christian life is quite simply mystical in that it is an ever-greater realization of the Body of Christ in the world through the actions of his Spirit (see Ratzinger 1998). The Holy Spirit, for Augustine, is the common Spirit of the Father and Son who ‘shows forth the communion’ (*Trin.* 15.19.37; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 424) of God who is love in essence (1 John 4: 8). The Spirit is the common love by which the Father and Son love one another and so is ‘distinctively (*proprie*)’ called love (*Trin.* 15.19.37.142; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 424), in other words, *Deus ergo ex deo est dilectio* (love therefore is God from God) (*Trin.* 15.17.31.108; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 420). As love, the Spirit is the unifying person of God, love as the *communio* of the Father and the Son, such that Augustine even goes so far as to claim that in a manner of speaking (*f. et symb.*, 9.19; Russell 1955) the Spirit as the love subsisting between Father and Son is the Godhead (*deitas*) of the Trinity. We may not only say then ‘God is Love’ (1 John 4: 8) but also ‘Love is God’ (*Trac. Ep. Jo.* 7.6, 9.10; Burnaby 2006, but see *F. et Symb.*, 9.19; Russell 1955). This Spirit, Love itself, is called variously by Augustine:

the 'gift of God' (*Trin.* 4.20.29, 5.11.12, 15.17.27; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 174, 197, 418, and *Ench.* 31.17; Evans 1953, and *F. et Symb.*, 9.19; Russell 1955), the 'will of God' (*Trin.* 15.20.38; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 425–6), the fountain of love/life (*Trac. Ep. Jo.* 7.1, 6; Burnaby 2006), the fire of love (*Sermon* 6.1–2 [Denis]; Kavanagh 1947 and *Sermon* 227; Hill 1993a) and the bond of communion between the Father and the Son (*Sermon* 71.18; Hill 1991, cf. *Trin.* 5.11.12; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 197).

The Church is the house of the Spirit built up in and by the donation of the love of Christ (*Trin.* 15.19.34; Mountain 1968/Hill 1996: 422–3, *Ench.* 15.56; Evans 1953, *Sermon* 71.28; Hill 1991, *Jo. Ev. Tr.* 26.13.1–2, 27.6; Rettig 1988) who is the same Spirit of love who abides in the Christian and the Christian in him: 'So it is the Holy Spirit of which he has given us that makes us abide in God and him in us. But this is precisely what love does. He then is the gift of God who is love' (*Trin.* 15.17.31; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 420–1). Christ did not send this gift of the Spirit once but ever sends him into the world so that those who are Christians may be ever transformed, recreated anew as his Body, the Church imaging the triune life of God as 'the gathering of Unity' (*Sermon* 71.37; Hill 1991: 269). In cleaving to one another, Christians cleave to Christ and he to them, in other words, "God is love, and he that abideth in love, abideth in God and God abideth in him." There is a mutual indwelling of the holder and the held: your dwelling in God means that you are held by him, God's dwelling in you means that he holds you, lest you fall. Think of yourself as being made a house of God' (*Trac. Ep. Jo.* 8.14; Burnaby 2006: 327). The Church, then, is quite simply, a perpetual Pentecost (cf. *Civ. Dei* 20.17; Bettenson 1987), a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit made up of the saints/the mystics in whom one sees that Spirit of Christ as little 'christs'. This Spirit who brings one together is he who is the Gift given by Christ as saving grace in the death and resurrection of Baptism and poured out in the anointing with chrism in confirmation/chrisimation and ever after in all the sacraments of God (cf. *Trin.* 15.26.46; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 431).

According to Augustine, we see God as Trinity, wise love (wisdom-love) in the Spirit (Williams 1990: 327), pre-eminently in our becoming members of the Body of Christ, as the *imago Trinitatis*. But how did he think Christians become the Church? The Holy Spirit is active in the sacraments as we saw earlier with baptism but this is also particularly true for the eucharist, which builds up the Church. Augustine exhorts his auditors to partake of the sacraments so that they may be joined in thankfulness to one another in love and become the Body of Jesus Christ (e.g. 'eat what binds you together' (*Sermon* 228B; Hill 1993a, 262), 'empty your heart of earthly love and you shall drink of the love divine: charity will begin its dwelling in you, and from charity nothing evil can proceed', and 'God's Spirit calls you to drink of himself' (*Trac. Ep. Jo.* 2.8, 7.6; Burnaby 2006: 274, 315)). As the Body of Christ, the Church reflects the very life of God, which is one of praise, insofar as praise is total self-giving love and wisdom in this love, which is communion in the Spirit (Williams 1990: 327).

In the love of the Spirit, the Church discovers itself anew as the very mystery of the triune God in Christ, enacted on the altar of God. In other words, Christians hold they discover their lives as Trinitarian and Christological precisely insofar as they are

eucharistic lives of self-giving praise and thanks, which is the 'wise love' of God. The life of the Spirit one receives as a Christian, then, in partaking of the sacraments is their own life as the one life in Christ as the God-man, the great High Priest, the offerer and offered in whom they have the royal priesthood of the eternal Kingdom of God (e.g. 'What you receive is what you yourselves are' (Sermon 229A.1; Hill 1993a: 270, cf. Sermon 6.1; Kavanaugh 1947, Sermon 227; Hill 1993a, Sermon 272; Hill 1993b and *Civ. Dei* 10.6, 20; Bettenson 1987)). Quite simply, in the reception of the eucharist, one is *in Christ* and to be in union with him with one's fellow Christians is to be a second Christ through his Spirit.

For Augustine, one is bound together in the life of faith and hope expressed as a love that strives to understand the depths of the wise love of God by participation in the mysteries of the Church. This love which is life is Jesus Christ in communion for eternity with the Father and the Spirit and now given to Christians as themselves in the Body of Christ and Fountain of Immortality. Using an ancient image, Augustine, in his homilies to the newly illumined about to partake of the eucharist, often will describe graphically how one becomes the Church, as the wise love of God in the Spirit, in the partaking of the sacraments. The initiates/catechumens are like many grains of wheat that were turned into one loaf of bread finally being sprinkled and kneaded at the font and then baked into 'the bread of the Lord' by the fire of the Holy Spirit (chrism):

Now consider what you have received, and, since you see that it was made into one when it was made what it is, be you also at one, be united in love; be united in holding the same faith and the same hope; be united in undivided charity. When heretics receive this sacrament, they receive testimony against themselves, because they strive for division; whereas this bread betokens unity. And at one time, the wine also was many grapes, but now it is one. The pleasant wine in the chalice is one, but it was not one until it had been crushed in the wine-press. In the name of Christ, you have now, as it were, reached the chalice of the Lord, but you did not reach it until you had been rendered humble and contrite through fasting and labours. You are there on the table; you are there in the chalice. You are this body with us, for, collectively, we are this body. We drink of the same chalice because we live the same life.

(Augustine, *Sermon* 6.2; Kavanaugh 1947: 322–32 =
Sermon 229.2; Hill 1993a: 265–8)

Christ, then, according to Augustine, gives to ordinary Christians in these sacraments his very life, the mystical gift of the Spirit as a wise love who recreates one as his temple, members of his Body, each person serving the other in, by, and through the love of Christ with particular spiritual gifts (*Trin.* 15.19.34; Mountain and Glorie 1968/Hill 1996: 422–3) becoming transformed into 'christs' in Christ through his Spirit. To be sure, Augustine so fully emphasized the pneumatic aspect of the Church, the members of the spiritual Body communing in love in each other as God communions in them and they in him and he in himself, a communion of the saints just as mystical as the experiences of Sts Symeon and Teresa, that, in a marvellous phrase in his *De Baptismo*, he described the Church, as 'the body of the one dove (*unicæ columbæ corpore*)' (*Bapt.* 4.20.28; cf. 3.18.23 and 5.16.21; Petschenig 1908/King 1999: 459; cf. 444 and 470).

CONCLUSION: THE CALL OF ALL TO THE MYSTICAL PATH

Pneumatology, therefore, in a mystical theological key, is the study of how the Holy Spirit hides himself, empties himself, in putting forward the other persons of the Trinity and in being the medium of spiritual and ecclesial life. But in revealing himself in concealing himself, Christians confess that they see him in the faces of their fellow saints and in the story of the extraordinary ordinariness of their life as adopted sons and daughters of God, in the process of illumination and deification becoming transformed in Christ as ‘christs’ through the Spirit from glory to glory, given to them not only in the extraordinary union of some with God in contemplative prayer, but in the life of the sacraments open to all where they partake of the Spirit. And in drinking of the Spirit, they believe they become ever more every day more perfectly conformed to the life of Christ by the loving will of the Father which is, at its very simplest, what it is to be a mystic: a Christian.

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Bulgakov (2004); Coakley (2013); Congar (1983); Kärkkäinen (2002, 2010); Lossky (1991); McIntosh (1998); Rogers (2005, 2009); Waaijman (2002); and Wainwright (1997).

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CHAPTER 27

CREATION AND REVELATION

DOUGLAS E. CHRISTIE

INTRODUCTION

PAIN and beauty. Or beauty in pain. This is perhaps the best place to begin reflecting on the meaning of creation in the Christian mystical tradition. Also for thinking about how and in what ways creation can be understood and experienced as revelatory of divine presence. There is a deep dialectical tension in the Christian attitude towards the created world and one finds this tension reflected often in the Christian mystical tradition. On the one hand, Christians have long sought and discovered God's presence within the simple beauty and goodness of the created world. The ancient Christian understanding of the cosmos as brought into being through the creative power of the *Logos* or Word (John 1), and the Word made flesh (John 1: 14) is crucial to the way Christians behold and experience the created world. It is a sacramental vision, in which all of creation is understood as having been imbued with an inherent and enduring stamp of divinity. But Christians have also long grappled with the ambiguous character of embodied existence, with the harsh reality of suffering and death, and with the often-inscrutable character of the cosmos itself. The profound vision of radical kenosis (self-emptying) of God in Christ expressed in Philippians 2, and the desolate image of the pierced body of Christ in the Gospels (and later in art and devotion) have played a critical role opening up a space where questions of uncertainty about the benevolent character of God's intentions in creation could be seriously engaged. Beholding God in and through creation has always meant, of necessity, grappling with the whole, complex, ambiguous character of existence—beautiful and vibrant and revelatory, but also marked by sickness, suffering, and death (Christie 2013).

An image from the fifth-century Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna captures this complex attitude toward the created world in early Christianity. A brilliant gold

cross floats in a shallow, dark blue dome surrounded by stars arranged in concentric circles, whose diminishing size toward the centre gives one the impression of gazing into a heavenly vault. It is a haunting image, the cross etched into the very heart of the cosmos, encompassed by it and also giving it great meaning. Here, we encounter a sensibility that can be found across the entire Christian tradition: the cosmos is Christocentric, even cruciform. Centuries earlier, Irenaeus of Lyons gave expression to this sensibility this way: 'because [Christ] is Himself the Word of God...who in His invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses its length and breadth and height and depth...the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross on the universe' (Ireneaus, *Proof of Apostolic Preaching*, 1.34; Ladner 1995: 99).

This ancient image expresses a long-held theological intuition about the cruciform and Christocentric character of the cosmos. In its careful attention to both the luminous beauty of the heavens and the reality of suffering and death, it can serve as a kind of lens through which to consider the broader questions about what it might mean for Christians to behold the created world as revelatory of God's presence. It suggests a way of beholding the created world that honours its insistent ambiguity while also remaining open to the varied ways of beholding creation as revelatory. This image points to the depth of vulnerability required for seeing and experiencing the created world as revelatory of God's presence. To see in this way, the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition suggests, requires adopting our own practice of kenosis, opening up within ourselves a deep enough space of humility and reciprocity to allow us to behold the presence of the One who comes to us in every element of creation and in the pain that remains deeply woven into the fabric of our mortal existence.

COSMOS AND LOGOS

How to perceive and experience the created world as sacramental, as charged with God's mysterious presence? For the Christian mystical tradition, such beholding is rooted in the ancient theological intuition that everything that exists comes into being and is sustained by the creative power of the Logos or Word. The roots of this intuition can be traced to the New Testament, where, in the prologue of John's Gospel and in the Letter to the Colossians especially, Christ the Word is understood as the utterance of God through whom the world has come into existence. Creation and redemption are understood as part of a single, continuous process. The created world is incomprehensible apart from the Word; and the Word cannot be apprehended fully and deeply except in and through the created world. This potent cosmological sense of *logos* came into Christianity through an eclectic range of influences, including the Jewish understanding of *hokma/sophia* (wisdom), the feminine creative principle through whom the world comes into being (Prov. 8), and *dabar*, the divine word of Yahweh that always effects what it says. Also present in this unfolding process were traditions of Greek

philosophical speculation on *logos* as mediating principle between God and the world. Gradually there emerged a theological conviction that the redemptive power of Christ as Logos comes to expression and is experienced not only through the person of Jesus and the scriptures, but also through the varied gestures of the cosmos itself.

Still, there is a paradox at the heart of the Christian response to the Word, rooted in a continuous tension between word and silence, that affects how we conceive of its potential for helping us experience the created world's expressive power. There is a strong and recurring appreciation in Christian contemplative thought and practice for the revelatory power of the Word—including the sense in which it can be understood as the enlivening force within every living being. The contemplative's primary orientation in response to this revelation is to listen for the Word, to give oneself over to its power and beauty, not least as comes to expression within created beings. The created world is expressive and it is necessary to learn this language. But there is also the rich ground of silence in which the contemplative listens, the physical silence of solitude and the interior condition of *hesychia* or stillness in which the Word can be apprehended and absorbed. And there is a still-deeper silence—the apprehension of the divine beyond language, beyond images, in what some of the early Christian contemplatives referred to as wordless, imageless prayer. Here one encounters a renunciation of all language (including, perhaps, all metaphors of language) for the sake of a pure, simple apprehension of what Meister Eckhart calls the birth of the Word in the ground of the soul—a deeply personal experience that is at the same time an expression of an encompassing unity with all living beings.

This renunciation of language for the sake of a silence that speaks more eloquently of the divine mystery than any language can forms a critical part of the apophatic strain of Christian mystical thought; paradoxically, this tradition employs a particular language and vocabulary—darkness, silence, unknowing, emptiness—to point toward and evoke a kind of knowing that cannot be encompassed, finally, in language. In this view the Word is ineffable, unknowable. It expresses, it seems, nothing—or nothing that can be grasped by the discursive mind, or through language and concepts. This apophatic dimension of Christian thought always stands in creative tension with more kataphatic expressions of thought and experience, which place more confidence than apophatic traditions do in the expressive power of language, symbols, and concepts to evoke and make present the divine mystery. In this kataphatic tradition, words, images, and things are understood to possess a sacramental significance, mediating, making present and effecting an encompassing and transformative awareness of divine mystery. In this tradition, the Word communicates—life, meaning, Spirit—in and through incarnate reality. Still, even here, one often encounters a recognition that language has limits, that the sheer force of the Word's expressive, revelatory power must eventually yield to silence, unknowing, darkness.

The tension or paradox that has so often marked the relationship between Word and silence, between apophatic and kataphatic approaches to spiritual experience, has assumed particular importance in discussions about the kind of theological meaning Christians derive from their encounter with the *logos* (Davies and Turner 2002). This

also helps to account for the ambiguous character of Christian attitudes towards the Word's relationship with the world. Although Christian thought and practice has generally avoided the profound denigration of the created world that characterized gnostic and other radically dualistic systems of thought, it has nevertheless struggled at times with a deep ambivalence regarding how to think about and respond to the created world. Even the bedrock theological conviction of the Word's incarnate character has not always been sufficient to overcome the sense, articulated already in the New Testament, that the Christian's true citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3: 20); or that the soul's delicate and beautiful encounter with God, while mediated by the body, cannot, ultimately, be contained by it.

There are serious theological and existential reasons for this ambivalence, one of the most significant being Christianity's long-standing concern to balance and reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable convictions that God is both radically transcendent (and hence neither fully comprehensible or able to be contained by and known through the world) and radically immanent (and hence sacramentally present in the world). The richly articulated theology of the *logos* has been crucial to Christian contemplative efforts to maintain a sense of balance and reciprocity between these two convictions, to discover what it means to inhabit a world that is, as Gerard Manley Hopkins memorably expressed it, 'charged with the grandeur of God', while also recognizing the limits of all language, all embodied experience to mediate the mystery of God. The Word arises from the very heart of God and comes to expression in the world. It permeates all matter, all living beings, and gives them life. But in its immensity and reach, it also transcends matter and can never be fully encompassed by it.

Somehow, amidst this ongoing tension, the Christian theological and mystical tradition engages the world with a sensitivity and openness that facilitates a recognition that this is also and always an encounter with the divine; similarly, there is an understanding that to open oneself deeply to the presence of the *logos* in the soul can enable one to apprehend the full extent of the created world's beauty and significance. Historically, the effort to understand and stand within this mystery has involved both theological reflection and concrete, spiritual practice. The theological elaboration of the Word's relationship with the world—both suffusing and transcending it—began very early and unfolded in a remarkable number of different idioms over time. Christian mystics and contemplatives drew upon these idioms in various ways to shape their own sense of what it meant to listen for and respond to the Word as part of their spiritual practice. A brief consideration of some of the ways Christians imagined the presence of the Word in the world can help to illuminate the distinctively contemplative contributions to the practice of attending to and living within this mystery.

One of the most important expressions of the Christian sense of the Word as permeating the entire cosmos arose from the Stoic philosophical tradition, in particular its attention to the idea of the Word as seed. The Stoics believed that the universe was governed by the divine *logos*, was in some sense identical with the *logos*, and must therefore be rational and bound by rules of cause and effect. But how to account for the inexplicable changes and developments that occur in nature, but that are not easily predicted by

such rules? The answer the Stoics arrived at was the notion of the *spermatikos logos*, the 'seed of the *Logos*' which contains within itself the germ of everything it is eventually to become. *Logoi spermatikoi* exist as seeds planted as it were in the divine *logos* waiting to germinate and unfold at some later, divinely ordained moment (Colish 1990: i. 31–5). Still, the *logos* is not merely as an idea, a philosophical principle. It is a kind of palpable substance. Zeno likened it to fire. It is 'as it were a seed, possessing the *logoi* of all things and the causes of events, past, present, and future' (Hahm 1977: 60). The cosmos is alive with this word. The metaphor of the word as seed not only helped to address a pressing philosophical question—did the universe cohere? It also suggested the deep and significant continuity between the *logos* as generative principle of the universe and the *logoi* that quickens every human person and the entire living world. It is in this sense that the Stoics could say, as philosopher Erazim Kohák suggests, that: 'The *logos* is the order of the *kosmos*, guiding alike the flight of the sparrow and the life of the sage' (Kohák 1987: 10). From such a perspective, the human person is anything but a stranger in the cosmos.

Here is an understanding of the Word that early Christian thinkers found immensely helpful to their own attempts to articulate a theologically and cosmologically meaningful Christology. Tertullian, for example, draws upon the Stoic understanding of the *logos* in responding to those like Hermagoras who claim that God is remote from the created world. To the contrary, he says: the Stoics remind us 'that God permeates the world in the same way as honey in the comb' (Tertullian, *Adv. Herm.* 44.1; Colish 1990: ii. 19). Elsewhere, he addresses the question of how the divine *logos* can be said to permeate the sensible world without losing its divinity: it is like the sun's relations with its own rays, he says, which are a portion and extension of their source (Tertullian, *Apol.* 18.11–13; 21.10–14; Colish 1990: ii. 19). Both analogies draw upon the idea of *logos* as generative principle immanent in the cosmos. Tertullian also voices his support for the Stoic idea that everything that exists, including the *logos*, is a kind of body: 'All things have one form of simple corporeality, which is a substantial thing' (Tertullian, *Adv. Herm.* 36.4; Colish 1990: ii. 20).

Other early Christian writers, such as Clement of Alexandria, would give more attention to the transcendent character of the *logos*, all the while seeking to discover an understanding of the Word supple enough to encompass both the transcendent reality of God and the immanent particularity of the living world. Drawing upon an eclectic mix of Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy, Stoicism, Middle Platonism, and Neoplatonism, Clement articulates an understanding of the *logos* capable of reaching into the hidden depths of the transcendent Godhead while also stretching out across the whole universe. According to Clement, the *logos* has three distinct but related dimensions. It is utterly transcendent, being identical with the totality of the ideas or powers of God. It is also the principle or pattern of everything that has been created. And it is the *anima mundi*, or world soul, the law and harmony of the universe, the power that holds it together and permeates it from the centre to its most extreme boundaries (Lilla 1971: 199–202).

Subsequent Christian reflection on this idea unfurled like so many seeds scattered by the winds, flowering, cross-pollinating, and spilling their seeds again into the dark loam

of the earth. The Word's cosmic expressions within the Christian tradition are, to borrow a phrase Paul Ricoeur uses to describe the revelatory character of scripture, irreducibly polyphonous and polysemous (Ricoeur 1980: 82). Light, darkness, seed, garden, tree, bread, wine are but some of the palpable realities of the world through which the *logos* was understood to have gestured forth (Ladner 1995: 65–154). So too are the modes of its expression diverse, arising not only within Christian theological discourse, but also in art and architecture, in biblical commentary, in mystical literature, in ascetic practice, in music, in poetry.

Consider how, in the *fiat lux* of the Genesis creation account and in the luminous gold background of ancient Christian and later Byzantine mosaics, *logos* comes to expression through light (Ladner 1995: 84). Or, on a more intimate scale, there is the presence of the *logos* who, according to Origen of Alexandria, rises up to meet one in the biblical text as ardent lover and who kindles within the reader a passionate love for the world: 'If a [person] can so extend his thinking as to ponder and consider the beauty and grace of all things that have been created in the Word,' he claims, 'the very charm of them will so smite him, the grandeur of their brightness will so pierce him as with a chosen dart . . . that he will suffer from the dart Himself a saving wound, and will be kindled with the blessed fire of His love' (Origen, *The Song of Songs*; Lawson 1956: 29). Here is a sensual, palpable word, present to us, says Origen, as touch, fragrance, sound, vision, and taste.

Rhythm and movement, form and colour, are also important to the expression of the *logos* within the long tradition of manuscript illustration, in which the Word was often set—actually and figuratively—within an entire constellation of living beings, suggesting the sense in which the Word is virtually embedded within and arising out of the living world. In the Lindisfarne Gospels, for example, one finds surrounding its illustration of the opening words from John's Gospel, *In principio erat verbum*: 'trumpet-patterns, whorls, triangles and lozenges, and birds and animals interlaced, as though foreshadowing the whole wealth of forms and life that was to issue from the Word; and this whole microcosm is highlighted by the interplay of colours used for the illumination . . . green, mauve, yellow, red and pink' (Nicholl 1997: 18). To gaze upon this intricate dance of word and world is to be drawn more deeply into the mystery of the Word's generative power. It is also to be asked to listen more carefully to the eloquence of the world.

It is to be invited to listen, as twelfth-century mystic and visionary Hildegard of Bingen did, for traces of the *prima vox* or 'voice primordial', the animating principle everywhere present in the world and present to the one sensitive enough to notice it and take it in (Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia* 4 (*O pastor animarum*); Newman 1988: 102–3). It is to feel the redemptive, healing transformative power of the incarnation of the Word as 'a blossoming of a beautiful flower / that gave fragrance / to all the spices / which had been dry' (Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia* 19 (*O viridissima virga*); Newman 1988: 126–7). It is to listen intently for the music in that flowering, a music that is the redemptive power of the Word present at once in the soul and the cosmos. And it is to be invited to respond, in song, to that music. Hildegard's own work does just this, her *symphonia* refracting and giving voice to the celestial harmony that was revealed to her

through vision and through the palpable world. So does the work of Francis of Assisi, who praised God in his renowned *Canticle to the Creatures*, not *because* of the elements of the living world but *through* them, his own voice rising, as it were, through theirs: 'Praised be You, my Lord, *through* Sister Moon and the stars . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind and through Air' (Francis of Assisi, *Laudes Creaturarum* (*Canticle of the Creatures*) 5–6; Armstrong et al. 1999: 113–14).

These expressions of feeling for the Word's incarnate presence in the life of the world serve as a reminder of how deeply the Christian imagination could respond to the world as a spiritually vital reality. Still, the practice of incorporating such awareness into the fabric of one's life was neither simple nor easy. In the ancient Christian contemplative tradition, one encounters both a theoretical understanding of what such a practice involves and practical guidance for how to bring it to embodied expression in one's life.

CONTEMPLATING THE BEAUTY OF EACH THING

The practice of *hesychia* or inner stillness was crucial to the larger, more encompassing project of ascetic relinquishment through which the contemplative's mind could be cleansed and freed from the attachments that prevented one from seeing the true character of things. For the monks, this was the work of an entire lifetime. They realized that stillness was both an *end* to be sought—what John Climacus called 'the very center of the mysteries'—and the *means* by which one might gradually come to this end, that is, an ongoing spiritual *practice*. Stillness belonged at the beginning of contemplative life and practice (Evagrius of Pontus believed it to be the foundation of everything else); but it was also something one would expect to encounter at the deepest levels of contemplative experience. In his work *The Foundations of the Monastic Life: A Presentation of the Practice of Stillness*, Evagrius offers this exhortation to those who would learn to live in stillness: 'Leave behind the concerns of the world, the principalities and powers set over them (Eph. 6: 12); that is, stand free of material concerns and passions, beyond all desire, so that as you become a stranger to the conditions deriving from these you may be able to cultivate stillness properly' (Evagrius, *Foundations*, 3; Sinkewicz 2006: 5).

With this simple reminder of the need to 'stand free of material concerns and passions', Evagrius signals what for him is the heart of the matter: to the extent that one is attached to things through the passions, one's perception of these things and one's relationship with them will be distorted, leaving one unable to respond to them freely and openly. But the work of *hesychia* ultimately goes deeper still, for Evagrius believed it was only by cultivating stillness that we could begin to experience the freedom from anxieties, cares and obsessions that obscure from us the true character of existence. As he notes in another of his works, *Exhortation to the Monks*: 'As it is impossible to purify water once troubled unless it remains undisturbed, so too it is impossible to purify

the state of a monk unless he practice stillness with all rigor and perseverance' (Evagrius, *Exhortation to Monks*, 7; Sinkewicz 2006: 218). Only by rooting out the deep sources of the passions' influence on human consciousness, Evagrius believed, could one learn to see things for what they are. This is what stillness makes possible. This is what it means to see all things in God and God in all things.

The early Christian contemplative tradition developed its own distinctive vocabulary for expressing this integrated, whole way of seeing reality in and through the Word, rooted in a sense of the intimate relationship that exists between the *Logos* (the divine, creative principle through whom all of creation came into being) and the *logoi* or 'inner essences' of created things. Contemplative practice meant acquiring, through ever-greater detachment and inner stillness, a capacity to discern the *logoi* of created things and so come to know them in and through the *Logos*. In his treatise *On Prayer*, Evagrius articulates it in these terms: 'We pursue the virtues for the sake of the inner essences (*logoi*) of created beings, and these we pursue for the sake of the Word (*Logos*) who gave them being, and [who] usually manifests himself in the state of prayer' (Evagrius, *On Prayer*, 51; Sinkewicz 2006: 198).¹ Here one finds the principal rationale for the conviction within early Christian contemplative thought and practice that all created beings are worthy of our most careful attention: in their *logoi* they carry traces of divine life (the *Logos*) within them, and as one learns to attend to them, one is brought to a profound knowledge of God that is also a knowledge of these created beings.

There is a fundamental theological intuition underlying this vision of reality that reflects one of the most cherished convictions of the early Christian contemplative tradition: the created world can truly be apprehended only in and through God. Vladimir Lossky, the great twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologian, expressed it this way: 'When we examine the nature of created things, seeking to penetrate into the reason of their being, we are led finally to the knowledge of the Word, causal principle and at the same time end of all beings. All things were created by the *Logos* who is as it were a divine nexus, the threshold from which flow the creative outpourings, the particular *logoi* of creatures, and the centre towards which in their turn all created beings tend, as to their final end' (Lossky 1957: 99). In the contemplative tradition, this intuition became woven into a *practice* through which one was brought, little by little, to a felt sense of this unity and wholeness. According to Maximus the Confessor, the seventh-century theologian and mystic: 'when after practicing the virtues [the contemplative] attains the state of dispassion, he culls the inner principles (*logoi*) of created beings and devoutly

¹ This translation has been slightly adapted. Sinkewicz translates *logoi* as 'reasons'; other translators, especially those responsible for translating the *Philokalia* into English, use the phrase 'inner essences' to translate *logoi*. Both translations are accurate. However, 'inner essences' seems to me to more accurately reflect the sense of the inner life and purpose of created beings to which Evagrius and other early Christian writers refer. Vladimir Lossky, in his classic work (1957: 98–9), refers to the *logoi* as the divine 'willings' or 'thought-wills'—the will of God manifest in the created world.

nourishes himself with the divine knowledge they contain' (Maximus the Confessor, *Two Hundred Texts on Theology, First Century*, 32, *Philokalia* ii; Palmer et al. 1986a: 120).²

Such observations regarding the contemplative practice of attending to the *logoi* of created beings can be found throughout the contemplative tradition represented in the *Philokalia* and other ancient Christian texts, and reflect the sustained effort on the part of Christian contemplatives to understand what it might mean to live with an awareness of the created world as alive in God. Still, there is a paradox at the heart of this tradition, namely the presence of an equally strong conviction that the very *Logos* whose life is manifest and made present through the *logoi* of created beings so radically transcends them that it can never fully be known through them. The 'divine knowledge' that Maximus describes as being mediated through the *logoi* is limited. There is a further, more encompassing, more mysterious knowledge that one comes to only through unknowing. It is in this sense that Maximus can say: 'the divine *Logos* is eternally made manifest in different modes of participation, and yet remains eternally invisible to all in virtue of the surpassing nature of his hidden activity' (Maximus the Confessor, *Various Texts on Theology, First Century*, 10, *Philokalia*, ii; Palmer et al. 1986a: 166). The hidden character of the Word's activity is, for Maximus, due to the immensity of the mystery of which it partakes. And it is this fundamental mystery that leads one to a practice of silence, or negation regarding the Word. 'The one who speaks of God negatively through negations is making the Word spirit,' says Maximus, 'as in the beginning he was God and with God. Using absolutely nothing which can be known he knows in a better way the utterly Unknowable' (Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge, Second Century*, 39; Berthold 1985: 156). Thus Maximus encourages his readers to cultivate a capacity for a 'simple encounter with the Word without the veils of the mind covering him'. This means developing an ability to 'behold with the naked mind the pure Word... the incorporeal Word'; learning to pay attention to and dwell in the presence of what he calls the 'naked Word' (Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge, Second Century*, 61; Berthold 1985: 160).

There is an undeniable beauty in the severity of this negation, and a real eloquence in this silence. Still, it is not easy to understand how attention to this 'naked Word' could ever facilitate a feeling of intimacy and kinship with the created world. Can any particular thing—any living being, any physical place, any fragrance or shade of colour—withstand such a fierce practice of negation? It seems more likely that one will end up like the monk Arsenius, who refused the sound of birdsong and of the wind rustling through the reeds for the sake of a pure, transcendent experience of the divine. The things of the world, seen from this perspective, are not enough to hold us. Only the *Logos*, only

² On the idea of the *logoi* (and their relationship to the *Logos*) in Maximus's work, see Cooper (2005: esp. 92–5). 'In Maximus' cosmology, the *logoi* are God's original ideas or intentions for creation: the unifying, ordering, determinative and defining principles in accordance with which God institutes created natures. A thing's being—what it is—is determined by its *logos*, by what God intends it to be. As constitutive of relation and definition, the *logoi* define the essential qualities and purpose of creaturely being and at the same time disclose the divine Word and Wisdom operative within the cosmic economy' (92).

God, can do that. And yet, this is not the only way to read the contemplative tradition's commitment to radical negation. One is, after all, invited by this same tradition to attend to the 'hidden activity' of the *Logos* at the heart of all reality. There is nothing in this invitation to suggest the need to refuse the things of this world. On the contrary, the impulse to preserve within experience a wide margin of silence, to keep from filling up the space of emptiness, has always been understood as rooted in a desire to know and encounter the *Logos* in its purest, its most diffuse, and its most varied expressions.

There are recurring voices within this contemplative tradition that insist that the highest forms of contemplation will always involve cultivating an openness or movement toward radical transcendence—towards a divine mystery beyond language, beyond images, and even beyond this world. Still, there is also evidence for the persistence of a tradition of thought and practice that came to be known as *theoria physike* or natural contemplation. In this approach to contemplative practice, attention to the natural world became a means of attending to the divine; and awareness of the presence of the divine unfolding within the mind could lead to a heightened sensitivity to the created world. Abba Moses, whose teaching is recorded in one of John Cassian's *Conferences*, comments on the immense difficulty for any embodied being of acquiring the kind of pure knowledge of God to which Evagrius refers. 'To look upon God at all times and to be inseparable from Him, in the manner which you envisage, is impossible for a man still in the flesh and enslaved to weakness. In another way, however, it is possible to look upon God, for the manner of contemplating God may be conceived and understood in many ways. God is not only to be known in His blessed and incomprehensible being, for this is something which is reserved for saints in the age to come. He is also to be known from the grandeur and beauty of His creatures' (Cassian, *On the Holy Fathers of Sketis, Philokalia*, i; Palmer et al. 1983: 96–7). This idea, which would later develop into the notion of the 'two books' (scripture and creation) by which God is known to human beings, suggests the importance the early monastic tradition attached to the practice of apprehending the divine through the created world. If the practice of paying attention to the created world in this way was sometimes ambiguous or fraught with tension, there was nevertheless a clear sense in this tradition that authentic contemplative practice could and often did involve learning to see deeply into the created world.

Peter of Damaskos, an eleventh-century Eastern Christian writer, gives eloquent expression to this ideal, pointing to the subtlety and depth involved in paying such careful attention to the created world:

By...contemplating dispassionately the beauty and use of each thing, he who is illumined is filled with love for the Creator. He surveys all visible things in the upper and lower worlds: the sky, the sun, the moon, stars and clouds, water-spouts and rain, snow and hail, how in great heat liquids coagulate, thunder, lightning, the winds and breezes and the way they change, the seasons, the years, the days, the nights, the hours, the minutes, the earth, the sea, the countless flocks, the four-legged animals, the wild beasts and reptiles, all the kinds of bird, the springs and rivers, the many varieties of plant and herb, both wild and cultivated. He sees in all things the order, the equilibrium, the proportion, the beauty, the rhythm, the union, the

harmony, the usefulness, the concordance, the variety. . . . contemplating thus all created realities, he is filled with wonder.

(Peter of Damaskos, *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge, The Sixth Stage of Contemplation, Philokalia*, iii; Palmer et al. 1986b: 136–7)

Such expressions of wonder in the midst of the created world are not uncommon in the Christian contemplative tradition. Still, this account presents a remarkable phenomenology of what it meant for the contemplative to learn to cultivate such wonder in response to the created world. A crucial dimension of this work, according to this particular witness, involved learning to contemplate the created world *dispassionately*.

In English, this word has many different connotations, almost none of which capture the particular meaning it had in ancient Christian contemplative tradition. There, as the work of the early Christian monastics and others makes clear, it meant learning to see beyond or free from the passions, those anomalous thoughts and feelings that so often cloud the mind and prevent it from apprehending reality freely and openly. To ‘contemplate dispassionately the beauty and use of each thing’ is, in this sense, to see things clearly—unencumbered by the clinging, egoic mind. It is to be free and open enough in oneself to see each thing for what it is, to appreciate their particular qualities, and to see them as part of a whole. In the context of the Christian contemplative tradition, this means seeing them *in God*. Peter’s account helps us to see how intimately this contemplative experience of illumination—a strong recurring motif of spiritual awakening in the Eastern Christian tradition—is connected to a sense of deeper apprehension of the beauty and harmony of the created world. To wake up in this way is a single, integrated experience; it is to come alive and learn to see everything, oneself, God, the world, as part of a whole.

SUFFERING AND MORTALITY

Still, the created world is not only beautiful and harmonious; nor is it completely and unambiguously whole. An honest account of the Christian response to the created world must reckon with all those elements of experience that are or seem to be irredeemably caught up in the power of death and decay—the sense of the created world as indifferent, or even hostile to us. Here the created world becomes not a means of communion with the Creator but a sign of the immense gulf that separates us from the goodness of God, a reality we can only meet in silence and suffering. In one of the stranger facets of Christian thought and practice, the very figure who serves to make present to believers the beauty and majesty of creation also embodies our alienation from it. The broken, bleeding figure of Christ on the cross is not only redeemer; he is the one who has descended utterly and completely into the realm of death, has allowed himself to be swallowed up by it. And while the Christian theological tradition always affirms the integral relationship of this descent to the resurrection, there are many places where one can discern a profound struggle to incorporate the brute fact of Christ’s suffering

and death into a larger vision of hope. Here one also sees a different and bleaker reading of the created world, refracted and mediated through the darkness of the cross.

What is it to be caught between resignation and hope—to feel the power of loss and death every bit as strongly as the longed-for resurrection? This dialectical tension can be seen in many places in the Christian spiritual tradition. I am thinking for example of Francis of Assisi—his ecstatic wonder at the reality of our communion with God through creation set against the intense physical suffering and the bewildering experience of communion with the crucified Christ at La Verna. Or Julian of Norwich, seeking nothing more than to participate fully and completely in the suffering of the ghastly figure who appears before her in her visions (no doubt mindful of those countless souls all around her lost to the Black Death) even as she seeks to behold and stand within the equally compelling vision of the tiny hazelnut—a sign of God’s faithful upholding of all things in being. Or Gerard Manley Hopkins who could celebrate, endlessly it seems, the glory of ‘dappled things’ present to us everywhere in God’s creation, but also give voice, in his ‘terrible sonnets’, to the most wretched sense of loss, grief, and emptiness.

This tension is not completely resolvable: the experience of creation is in the end radically ambiguous. The sense of sparkling joy at the awareness of the myriad ways in which the Creator is made present to us, in and through the created world, vies continuously with a sense of foreboding, bewilderment, and lostness that not infrequently overwhelms us as we struggle through life in these mortal bodies. An extraordinary but instructive expression of this facet of Christian experience can be seen in the fifteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald.

The Altarpiece, at the centre of which stands perhaps the most awful crucifixion ever rendered by an artist, cannot really be understood apart from intense suffering to which it was a response. I am referring to those suffering from the terrible, painful, and often fatal bacterial disease known as St Antony’s Fire, a disease that had been ravaging Europe for almost five hundred years by the time the altarpiece was commissioned by the Antonite order. When it was completed, it came to stand as part of a hospital complex where victims of the disease were treated. The hospital setting, with its countless suffering souls, helps to account for the distinctive and dark imagery of the altarpiece. This is true not only of its depiction of Christ, but also of its rendering of two other figures who are central to the altarpiece. One of them, appearing on a side panel, is a hideous figure whose flesh is covered with putrid sores; his stomach is distended and his limbs appear about to fall from his body altogether. He is suffering, in all likelihood, from the dreaded disease. The other is St Antony of Egypt, after whom the Antonites were named, a saint who was believed to have a particular power to secure healing for those suffering from the disease. He is depicted as enduring his own torment, being pummelled, clawed, and torn at by a host of gruesome, demonic beings.

The confluence of these three figures—Christ, St Antony, and the anonymous victim of St Antony’s Fire—in Grünewald’s altarpiece creates an almost overwhelming vision of human suffering. Yet the precise meaning of this vision of suffering is not easy to grasp. The resurrection is also represented prominently within the larger tableau of the altarpiece; it is inconceivable that this crucial Christian image of hope should have been

ignored or underplayed by the artist. In this sense, one can fit the image of the suffering Christ into the classic Christian paradigm of the paschal mystery: suffering is redemptive; death is a passage through which one must move in the mysterious process leading to rebirth. But the depth and intensity of the suffering Grünewald depicts in this altarpiece is so extreme—the gaunt, bloody, torn figure of Christ so awful, so grotesque, so lifeless—that one hesitates to venture any thought about his possible rebirth. It is difficult to avoid entirely a feeling of uncertainty about whether relief from this suffering is possible at all. More than anything else, one feels here the pure force of death.

In the context in which the altarpiece was first created, it was crucial that neither Christ nor St Antony be seen as aloof from the suffering and anxiety that marked the lives of those afflicted by the disease. Rather they needed to be seen as empathizing with, even participating in it. A description of the disease from a medieval source helps to show why this would have mattered so much: 'The intestines [are] eaten up by the force of St Antony's Fire, with ravaged limbs, blackened like charcoal; [victims] either die miserably, or they live more miserably seeing their feet and hands develop gangrene and separate from the rest of the body; and they suffer muscular spasms that deform them' (Hayum 1989: 21). It is in light of such pathetic, gruesome scenes that Grünewald's altarpiece must be seen. It is here too that we begin to understand the significance of its pessimistic (or we might say simply say honest) depiction of the created world: embodied existence, Grünewald reminds us, exposes us to the most intense and unrelenting vulnerability, in which suffering and loss—never completely explicable—are ever present. If the created world is, as we have seen, luminous and sacramental and revelatory of God's goodness and love, it is also at times experienced as dark and awful, a sign of God's inscrutability or absence.

This dialectical tension is fundamental to the Christian understanding of the created world. And if it leaves us with a sense of uncertainty regarding the possibility of ever feeling completely at home in the world, it signals a willingness to confront those dimensions of embodied experience that are most painful and ambiguous. In doing so, it helps create the conditions for an honest engagement with the full range of our experiences in the created world, including those in which the world seems hostile to our well-being. And here the image of the crucified Christ is central—not only to our understanding of suffering, but to our understanding of what it means to exist in the created world.

'Horror could not be painted more ruthlessly' (Pevsner and Meier 1958: 14). So comments Nikolaus Pevsner on the Christ figure of Grünewald crucifixion. This comment could apply equally to Grünewald's rendering of Antony or of the anonymous figure suffering from the disease who also appears in the painting: all are plunged into the horror of this debilitating, incurable disease. None of them emerges unscathed. This is part of the power of the altarpiece, for it creates a kind of seamless garment that allows us to see the suffering of the incarnate Christ as joined to the abysmal suffering of all human beings. The Christ of the Isenheim Altarpiece, suggests J. K. Huysmans, 'personifies . . . the religious piety of the sick and poor . . . [and] would seem to have been made in the image of the [victims of the disease] who prayed to him; they must surely have found consolation in the thought that this God they invoked had suffered the same torment

as themselves, and had become flesh in a form as repulsive as their own; and they must have felt less forsaken, less contemptible' (Huysmans 1976: 12). This is a beautiful intuition and may well reflect something of what victims of the disease felt as they gazed upon the image of the altarpiece. But in fact we do not really know what they felt about their condition, any more than we can ever know what another human being afflicted by suffering feels. Still, gazing at this magnificent altarpiece, one senses its insistent question, a question whose disturbing force we still feel five hundred years later: is it possible to look into the darkest places of affliction and find hope there? Or does affliction (our own, that of others, and of the world itself) demand of us a kind of reticence, a willingness to suspend judgement about its possible redemptive meaning and to respond to it on its own terms, with as much honesty and humility as possible? And, if the haggard, broken face of the suffering Christ has a revelatory meaning, what does it reveal? The presence of a loving God amidst our suffering and loss? Yes, emphatically so. But what of the loss, the utter undoing of life that this image expresses? What the tradition describes theologically as God's descent (kenosis) into the very reality of death, God's identification with death?

The iconographic tradition presents us with images of the death of Christ that are so stark, so bleak, and uncompromising that it is difficult to avoid the sense that one is being asked to attend to the pure force of death on its own terms, without recourse to the hope of the resurrection—at least not as an 'answer' to the 'problem' of death. Instead there is a kind of descent into death itself and with it a difficult reckoning with the meaning of our embodied existence in the created world. Much of the enduring value of these representations, not only Grünewald's altarpiece, but also Andrea Mantegna's 'Lamentation of Dead Christ' and Hans Holbein the Younger's 'The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb', lay precisely in their insistence on gazing into the dark reality of death. To confront these images and gaze upon them is to find oneself drawn into an encounter with death so intimate, so harsh, and so unrelenting, that the very possibility of hope seems to evaporate. It becomes nearly impossible to imagine an end to death, or a sense of existence not dominated by death. It threatens to engulf everything. In light of this, the vitality, goodness, and sacramental character of the created world are called into question. Creation becomes a place of emptiness and absence, itself a kind of tomb.

It was this sense, or something close to it, that seems to have provoked Fyodor Dostoevsky's bewildered response to Hans Holbein's 'The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb' in his novel *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky himself had seen the painting in Basel during a trip to Europe in 1867; from accounts left by his wife Anna, it is clear that his encounter with the painting had a profoundly unsettling effect on him. In the novel, it is Prince Myshkin who first gives voice to this: upon seeing a copy of the painting in Rogozhin's apartment, the Prince recalls a trip he had taken some years earlier when he had seen the original and declares to Rogozhin, 'Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith' (Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*; Garnett 2004: 201). This is a strange response to a painting that can be and often has been understood very differently and more hopefully.³ Still,

³ See Wilson (1996: 94–5). He accuses Dostoevsky of having 'missed the point entirely' of the painting, which in its uncompromising depiction of death was in fact oriented toward expressing 'what Incarnation is about'.

Dostoevsky captures something fundamental about Holbein's bleak portrait of Christ's dead body: it is difficult to think of another image in the history of Western art that conveys such an uncompromising and potent a vision of Christ's death, and of death itself. It feels, as Julia Kristeva has noted, 'inaccessible, distant, and without a beyond' (Kristeva 1989: 243).⁴ For Dostoevsky, who was so preoccupied with what he perceived to be the relentless force of death then manifesting itself in an increasingly secularized and nihilistic Europe and Russia, the painting evoked something terrifying: an end with no hope of renewal or transformation. Here one feels the utter finality of death, that well of darkness from which no one emerges.

It is the character Ippolit, one of Dostoevsky's 'underground men,' who expresses the full weight of this idea, and who senses its potential implications for our entire understanding of the world. Considering the figure in the tomb, Ippolit declares:

It is in every detail the corpse of a man who has endured infinite agony before the crucifixion; who has been wounded, tortured, beaten by the guards and the people when He carried the cross on His back and fell beneath its weight, and after that has undergone the agony of crucifixion, lasting for six hours at least (according to my counting) . . . It is simply nature, and the corpse of a man, whoever he might be, must really look like that after such suffering.

Ippolit acknowledges what has long been accepted within Christianity, that Christ's suffering was real and that his body was 'completely subject to the laws of nature on the cross.' Still, the intensity and force of the image provokes an awareness that far transcends the understanding that comes to one through the recitation of a creedal formula. And in Ippolit's case, the beholding of this image undoes something in him:

In the picture the face is fearfully crushed by blows, swollen, covered with fearful, swollen and blood-stained bruises, the eyes are open and squinting: the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a sort of deathly, glassy light . . . The question instinctively arises: if death is so awful and the laws of nature so mighty, how can they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even He did not conquer them? He who vanquished nature in his lifetime, who exclaimed, 'Maiden, arise!' and the maiden arose—'Lazarus, come forth!'

(Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*; Garnett 2004: 374–5)

Here, as he will do again in *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoevsky pushes the question of faith to its uttermost limit, especially in relation to the often-cruel and capricious reality of embodied existence in the created world, and above all the reality of death. If Christianity is to mean anything, it must somehow be capable of absorbing and responding to the full weight of this reality. Not the idea of death. Or death as a temporary antechamber. But death in its full, awful finality. Still, as we encounter Holbein's painting

⁴ See also, Spivey (2001), who situates Holbein's and Grünewald's works within a long history in the art of the West to represent pain and suffering. He describes Holbein's panel as stating 'a true limit of representation: the absolute sacrifice of divinity to flesh' (101).

in *The Idiot*, it reveals and invites a reckoning not only with the stark fact of Christ's death, but also with what Ippolit describes as the mighty 'laws of nature'.

Looking at such a picture, one conceives of nature in the shape of an immense, merciless, dumb beast, or more correctly, much more correctly, speaking, though it sounds strange, in the form of a huge machine of the most modern construction which, dull and insensible, has aimlessly clutched, crushed and swallowed up a whole earth, which was created perhaps solely for the sake of the advent of that Being. This picture expresses and unconsciously suggests to one the conception of such a dark, insolent, unreasoning and eternal Power to which everything is in subjection.⁵ (Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*; Garnett 2004: 375)

This image torments Ippolit and leaves him living a kind of waking nightmare in which he feels himself to be continuously threatened with annihilation from this dumb beast. In Dostoevsky's novel, it evokes a sense of reality that seemed to him to be growing increasingly prevalent in the late nineteenth century: the world, and the created world in particular, as mechanized, soulless, and empty of meaning.

The sense of existential dread before 'the dark, insolent, unreasoning Power' that Dostoevsky identified so closely with nature itself has continued to surface in Western literature and art. Yet, it is not always easy to describe what it is that lay at the source of this dread or to distinguish it in any simple way from the equally insistent feeling for life that so often accompanies such dread. Rainer Maria Rilke notes this in a letter written to Lotte Hepner in 1915 concerning Tolstoy's long struggle with these questions.

Tolstoy's enormous experience of Nature (I know hardly anyone who had so passionately entered inside Nature) made him astonishingly able to think and write out of a sense of the whole, out of a feeling for life which was permeated by the finest particles of death, a sense that death was contained everywhere in life, like a peculiar spice in life's powerful flavor. But that was precisely why this man could be so deeply, so frantically terrified when he realized that somewhere there was pure death, the bottle full of death or the hideous cup with the handle broken off and the meaningless inscription 'Faith, love, hope,' out of which people were forced to drink a bitterness of undiluted death. (Rilke, *Letters*; Greene and Herter Norton 1947–8: 148)

Pure, undiluted death. One senses here something akin to Holbein's rendering of Christ Dead in the Tomb, or Grünewald's stark crucifixion, or Dostoevsky's dumb beast. Terror before this brute reality overwhelms everything. Nor is it easy to say how faith, or in Tolstoy's case a 'sense of the whole', can stand in the face of such bitterness. Yet somehow it does. To say that death is 'contained everywhere in life, like a peculiar spice in life's powerful flavor', as Rilke says of Tolstoy's work, comes perilously close to cliché.

⁵ On these passages in *The Idiot*, seen within their broader historical, cultural, religious contexts, see Mochulsky (1967: 334–81, esp. 362–5).

Perhaps the only thing that keeps it from becoming so is the very honesty with which the terror before death is represented here. Still, Rilke's observation leaves unanswered the question of how much reality we can bear; or what it might mean in the face of such an honest, uncompromising reckoning with death to maintain a sense of the whole, or a feeling for life and the created world.

These are not only questions of the fifteenth or the nineteenth century. In fact, if anything, the contemporary moment has given us a new and deepened feeling for their pathos and meaning. The image of the broken figure at the centre of the Isenheim Altarpiece or of Holbein's dead Christ in the tomb can still speak to us. But what does it mean to behold them in a world marked by unchecked disease, historical genocide, and the death of nature? Can they help us understand what it means to encounter and engage the created world—luminous and beautiful but also broken and degraded—in this historical moment?

In responding to such questions, we begin to sense how a Christology of darkness or absence can serve as a necessary complement to a Christology of light and presence. How the cultivation of a steady attention towards the darkest places of affliction can be understood as a necessary and important contemplative practice, a way of practicing solidarity amidst a suffering and broken world. Here, the witness of contemporary novelist W. G. Sebald is immensely helpful. In one of his many penetrating explorations into the kind of existence that is still possible for us in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Sebald's narrator reflects on his own encounter with the Isenheim Altarpiece:

The extreme vision of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness, was one I had always felt in tune with, and now I found my feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced—consciousness—and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next.

(Sebald 1996: 170)

Within the Christian mystical tradition, the abyss has long been recognized as significant place of encounter with the divine mystery, an unencompassable immensity (Hadewijch of Brabant, *The Abyss of Omnipotence*; Hart 1980: 189–92). Here, however, we encounter the abyss in another guise: the bottomless reality of suffering and death, in particular the horrors born of the Holocaust. This is the long shadow that hangs over all of Sebald's work, and one senses its presence here in the narrator's sympathetic response to Grünewald's crucifixion. The narrator's feeling of relief at his direct encounter with

Grünewald's work seems strange, especially given how deeply it opens him to the reality of that suffering and death. But it confirms something in him—an inchoate feeling that he has long carried within him about its crushing weight. Confronting it explicitly enables him to acknowledge it, and stand more fully within the mystery of it, even if its meaning remains elusive, incomprehensible.

This sense of the instability underlying the whole of our existence helps to illuminate the particular response to human suffering found in Sebald's response to the dark Christology of the Isenheim Altarpiece. Suffering, we begin to realize, is endless. So too is the ambiguity of the created world. Not only can we never adequately express it in language, neither can we determine any precise boundaries: "The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape." The whole of nature. Here, one begins to feel the true power of these artistic representations: nothing escapes the reach of such suffering. Everything is engulfed, distorted, destroyed by it. The broken body holds and draws to itself every other broken thing, which empowers the image still further. "There are always more torments to come." We know this catalogue of torments; and we recognize the immense difficulty of facing up to it. The narrator risks such a gaze. In doing so he descends, if only for a moment, into the dark space occupied by all those suffering souls.

The power of many of these images, certainly that of Grünewald, derives in no small part from their close imaginative relationship to actual executions and rituals of punishment (Groebner 2004: 87–123). It is not only our own violence-stunned time that leads us to respond to the painting so forcefully; it is all the blood and violence that lie behind the canvas. At Isenheim, there were all those suffering from St Antony's Fire; but there were also countless other souls, mostly nameless, including all those hauled to the scaffolds and subjected to long, painful deaths. Sebald's narrator in *The Emigrants* seems to feel all of this intuitively as he gazes at the torn body of Grünewald's Christ. But there is even more that is amiss, much more. In his work *After Nature*, Sebald considers the question of what this image tells us about the character of the world itself. Ruminating on its significance for us in this century of horrors, this is what he notices:

the absence of balance in nature
which blindly makes one experiment after another
and like a senseless botcher
undoes the thing it has only just achieved.

(Sebald: 2002: 27)

One hears echoes here of Dostoevsky's 'dark, insolent, unreasoning and eternal Power'. And of Job's unknowable and, to him, malevolent Wisdom. Also, the haunting cry from the cross. The sense that the universe cannot be found out. Or worse, that it is irrevocably set against us. The 'absence of balance in nature' is written on the broken bodies of the afflicted. It is senseless. Because of it the world is continuously being unmade.

CONCLUSION

One recoils against such a relentlessly pessimistic reading of our embodied existence and of the created world. But in truth there is no argument that can entirely refute this vision of existence. It is an intuition born of long, fierce attention to the reality of affliction. And if it does not reflect the whole of reality, it nevertheless reveals a baffling, ambiguous dimension of reality that seems to run through almost everything. But what to call it? Death? Nature? The ephemeral character of everything that exists? And how can one situate it in relation to the equally powerful intuition that the world is, was, and always will be endlessly beautiful and grace-filled, that somehow existence matters and has meaning? And that God can be encountered and known through the gifts of creation?

Such questions lead one almost inevitably to a place of humility, even silence: the mystery to which they point is unfathomable. Still, they call for our attention. And it is here that contemplative and mystical traditions are so necessary and important. Their fundamental commitment to the work of noticing, describing, and standing within experience allows everything, however ambiguous or painful, to be held, for its own sake. There is a consistent trajectory of hope here, a sense that affliction and death are not the final words, that the created world can be known and experienced as sacramental, revelatory of God's presence. But there is also a remarkable willingness to face affliction, to stand in it and seek to understand what it is and what it has to teach us about the character of our existence and the meaning of our commitments in this broken but still-beautiful world.

SUGGESTED READING

Christie (2013); Cooper (2005); Davies and Turner (2002); Ladner (1995).

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CHAPTER 28

ANTHROPOLOGY

PHILIP SHELDRAKE

FOLLOWING the teachings of Jesus Christ, Christianity from its earliest days affirmed that humanity is being radically transformed in ways that point towards a destiny 'in God' that we can only tentatively imagine.

Theological anthropology, that is, Christian understandings of human identity, embraces the belief that humans are fundamentally and irreversibly 'in the image of God'. Yet, at the same time, the existential reality of human existence includes failure and the need for healing and forgiveness (expressed in the concepts of 'sin' and 'salvation').

As we shall see in the course of this chapter, anthropology in mystical theology broadly takes three forms. There is a 'positive' or kataphatic approach that focuses on what we may legitimately affirm about human identity. The second approach is known as 'negative' or apophatic. This emphasizes that the human soul or 'self' in its deep union with the divine is, like the reality of God, ultimately beyond our capacity to know definitively. The third form of mystical anthropology, which emerged during the last decades of the twentieth century, may be described as 'liberationist' and involves a socially critical approach to human identity. It is important to emphasize that while these three approaches have distinctive features they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they complement each other and, indeed, may intersect in the writings of specific mystical thinkers.

There are necessarily scriptural and doctrinal starting points for our understanding of human identity. However, beyond these foundations what is known as 'mystical theology' has, from its patristic origins, consistently sought a different approach to theological reflection from one driven essentially by analytical or systematic thinking. This is partly a question of engaging the process of theology with a lived experience of God and with the ongoing practice of a Christian life. As a consequence, it is also a question of maintaining an ambiguous balance of 'knowing' and 'unknowing' both in relation to the transcendent mystery of God and in relation to the core of human identity which is united to God.

An important thread running through this chapter embraces two interrelated elements. These are consistently present in the writings of mystics and mystical theologians and

underpin mystical anthropology. The first element is that 'the mystical' involves a process of self-forgetfulness rather than the pursuit of self-preoccupied interiority. Second, as a consequence, mystical theology reminds us that the core of anthropology is a risky openness to a God who draws human beings forward into the unknown. In that sense, human identity is not a static reality but a dynamic and open-ended *process*. These interrelated elements of self-emptying and a divinely guided process of becoming are present in different ways in the examples of mystical theological writing that illustrate this chapter.

As a medium for exploring the three approaches to anthropology that I have outlined, specific attention will be given to particular writers and texts. The 'positive', kataphatic form of mystical anthropology will be illustrated by the theologically sophisticated writings of the fourteenth-century English anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich (c.1342–c.1417/1420). However, when we turn to the second, 'negative' or apophatic form of anthropology, we find that elements of Julian of Norwich's approach to human identity fall into this category as well. This 'negative' form of anthropology will be briefly illustrated with reference to the medieval Dominican theologian, Meister Eckhart, and to another fourteenth-century English mystic, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Finally, the 'liberationist' approach to anthropology has outlined intersections between contemplative-mystical consciousness and socially critical reflection on the human condition. In this context, the writings of Segundo Galilea and Gustavo Gutiérrez will be taken as examples.

However, before exploring the three approaches to mystical anthropology, I want to underline the importance of mystical theology in itself and then to outline more clearly my approach to theological anthropology.

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

The eminent Belgian Catholic philosopher, Louis Dupré, who developed an interest in what might be called a mystical experience of 'the self', suggested that 'the mystics start their spiritual journey from within, and that is the only place where the believer *must* begin, whether he wants to or not' (Dupré 1982: 25). How does this inwardness align with my suggestion that the essence of mystical anthropology involves self-forgetfulness rather than self-focused interiority and also being radically open to a mysterious God who draws human beings into the unknown? What Dupré critiqued is the failure of conventional theology to be touched by the *reality* of God rather than limiting itself to systematic attempts to analyse the nature of the divine. In that sense, Dupré's 'from within' is not self-preoccupation but implies the courage to encounter God and so to be radically changed. What is conventionally termed 'mystical theology' is an alternative (and subversive) approach to theological reflection based not simply on intellectual thought but also on the vulnerable practice of contemplation. What might it mean for us to take seriously the witness of those theological thinkers like Julian of Norwich

who risk the experience of ‘rupture’—that is, in the words of Bernard McGinn, the ‘surprise and amazement that opens up new possibilities in spiritual experience’? (McGinn 2015: 3).¹

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

In terms of my approach to theological anthropology, I have already noted that there are three important forms in the context of mystical theology. However, the overall framework of anthropology consists of reflection about what humans are and what being human means. In other words, what constitutes us as human beings? An additional aspect that follows from this concerns how human beings relate both to the wider physical world and to their social existence. Are humans fundamentally free-standing and autonomous or are they inherently social beings? If humans are essentially social, then ‘being-in-society’ or being in relationship is not an optional extra or a secondary step but is fundamental to human identity.

Augustine of Hippo was, and continues to be, a major influence on Western theology, not least in relation to theological anthropology. It is important to note that for Augustine and other classic spiritual theologians an attention to interiority or inwardness did not imply the same thing as it might do in our modern era. In his essay within the multi-volume *A History of Private Life* the Augustine scholar Peter Brown noted that the earliest Christian approaches to human identity inherited from late classical Judaism an intense sense of the vital solidarity between each human individual and society. Individual human existence was intrinsically related to the common good. As a consequence it was deemed to be a danger if people retreated into privacy rather than gave themselves wholeheartedly to the task of serving their neighbours. In this regard, writers turned their attention to the ‘thoughts of the heart’ which was the supposed core of human motivation. Thus the human condition of being in solidarity with others was expressed in the image of the undivided heart (Brown, 1996).

Augustine followed this tradition and adopted the symbol of the heart as a way of expressing ‘the self’. The point to underline is that Augustine’s language of the heart is not evidence of a privatized or radically individualised ‘human self’. In fact, according to Augustine my interiority is where I am also united with the whole of creation. For Augustine, God created humans with the divine image (*imago Dei*) in their hearts. This *imago Dei* is the true self although sin may disconnect us from it. The concept of the *imago Dei* points to humanity being inherently united to God—a theme strongly underlined in Julian of Norwich. Humanity in this image also reflects the triune nature of God, expressed by Augustine and later mystical theologians in the three-fold structure of human identity in terms of memory, understanding and will.

¹ In using the term ‘rupture’, McGinn draws explicitly upon the important writings on mysticism by Michel de Certeau, particularly his late work (1992).

Augustine's notion of the *imago Dei* in which we are created and which is imprinted on the heart must be read alongside his overall doctrine of creation. In Augustine's commentary on Genesis, Adam's sin was precisely to please himself and to live for himself (*secundum se vivere, sibi placere*). Thus the unity, communion or *koinonia* that should be at the heart of everything is ruptured—whether this is our unity with God, our solidarity with others or our harmony with our true self. In other words, the fundamental sin is to withdraw into a self-enclosed privacy. Self-seeking pride becomes the archetypal sin (*Gn. litt* XI.15.19–20). The original Garden of Eden and Augustine's 'City of God' were and are based on 'the love that promotes the common good for the sake of the heavenly society' (*Gn. litt* XI.15.20). For Augustine, the Heavenly City would be a community in which there would be the fullness of sharing (see Markus 1998: 78).

In terms of the foundations of Augustine's theological anthropology, there is a tension that should not be resolved between a clear sense of a personal self and an equally clear sense of the fundamentally social nature of human existence. 'The heart' for Augustine is where a true integration of our inner and outer lives takes place. True, Augustine in Book 10 of his *Confessions* referred to 'my heart, where I am whatever it is that I am' and in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (Section 18.10) exclaimed 'return to your heart!' However, Augustine is equally clear that if anything is claimed to be in the heart but does not show itself outwardly in love and community, it is illusory. In the words of the Augustine scholar, Thomas Martin, 'The return to the heart is but the first step of a conversion process that proves itself in universal and unrestricted—catholic—love' (Martin 2003: 48).

This theme of returning to the heart connects strongly with how Julian of Norwich approaches her theology of human identity. This significantly echoes the thought of Augustine. While the question of *what* we are as humans is important, equally challenging is *how* we come to know ourselves deeply rather than superficially. As Julian underlines, this is not a self-driven intellectual process but involves a contemplative journey inwards. In Julian's text, for us to know our own soul (the true self) demands that, first of all, we seek God.

JULIAN OF NORWICH'S THEOLOGY

By way of introduction, Julian of Norwich offers a particularly rich expression of late medieval mystical writing. Indeed, many scholars consider her to be one of the most original English theologians of all time. Julian flourished at a time of horrendous social and religious problems in England and wider Europe—the Great Plague, the Hundred Year's War between England and France, the social upheaval known as the Peasants' Revolt, the severe critique of the institutional Church by the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe and the subsequent Lollard heresy and the Great Schism within the Western Church.

During the Middle Ages, Norwich was the second largest city in England—a wealthy and culturally-rich trading centre with ready access to the sea and to the Continent. It had a large number of religious communities of men and women, several with significant libraries. It is also believed to be the only English city to have housed small groups of Beguines, members of a lay movement of women who flourished particularly in Flanders and gave birth to a rich mystical literature.

In terms of Julian herself, we actually know very little. Some people speculate that she may originally have been a Benedictine nun, others that she had been married and was a widow. Her name is probably taken from the dedication of St Julian's Church in Norwich where she became an anchoress sometime after she suffered from an almost fatal illness in 1373 when, according to her own testimony, she was thirty and a half years old. Apart from Julian's own writings, the only other evidence consists of references in several surviving wills and the description of a visit to her in the *Book of Margery Kempe* by another of the so-called fourteenth-century 'English Mystics.'

Julian is the author of two texts, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* (known as the Short Text) and *A Revelation of Love* (known as the Long Text). These texts in the so-called 'age of the vernacular' are the first known writings in English by a woman (see ed. Watson & Jenkins 2006). They are based on sixteen visions or 'showings' that Julian experienced over a twenty-four hour period during her illness. Julian's own acute suffering plus the graphic visions of Jesus' Passion, provoked by the crucifix that her parish priest placed by her bed, became the basis of Julian's deep insights and her later development of a mystical theology. This underlines the place of suffering as the locus of much medieval mystical theology.

References that follow are to chapters in the theologically sophisticated Long Text. It used to be assumed that this was written by Julian some twenty years after her visions as the result of extensive contemplation and theological reflection. This conventional timescale is questioned by Watson and Jenkins in their recent scholarly edition of Julian's writings. The Long Text may well have gone through several revisions with the final version perhaps dating from early in the second decade of the fifteenth century.

In their critical edition of Julian's writings and in their modern translation, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh described Julian as a systematic theologian (Colledge & Walsh 1978a, 1978b). It seems to me that they worked within the conventions of their day when systematic theology was given a certain priority. Because there was a prejudice against the idea that women could be serious theologians, it may be that the editors felt bound to make a particularly strong case that a medieval lay woman, writing in the vernacular, could be described as a theologian at all.

Nowadays, there are serious questions about this interpretation of Julian's theology. In his recent study, Denys Turner suggests that Julian does not conform to the stereotype of a systematic theologian nor did she write a conventional medieval theological treatise. In an earlier study of Julian's theology, Joan Nuth notes that she does not use a philosophical-conceptual framework. Following Jean Leclercq's distinction between scholastic and monastic theology, Nuth goes on to suggest that Julian belongs within the

tradition of 'monastic theology.' In other words, Julian's priority is not intellectual argument but the contemplative nurturing of spiritual insight (Nuth 1991: 23–24). However, in my judgment Julian does not overtly manifest the usual characteristics of the monastic theology tradition. Julian does not lose touch with her fundamental source, that is, her intense visionary experience in the midst of sickness. What is intrinsic to Julian's theological writing is the pastoral comfort of her fellow Christians.

For these reasons, I suggest that Julian's theology has three fundamental dimensions. First, it is mystical theology in that her rich theological reflection is founded upon deep mystical experience and, according to her own testimony, intense on-going spiritual reflection over a period of many years. This leads Julian to a transformed perception of God, and of God's evaluation of the human condition. Without her deep encounter with God, and the sense that she had been 'shown' vitally important insights through that encounter, Julian would not have written theology at all.

Second, Julian is a 'vernacular theologian' in two senses (McGinn 1998: 19). First, she wrote at a time that is known among scholars as 'the age of the vernacular,' notably expressed in the Middle English writings of her contemporaries Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland. For the first time, English became a literary language rather than merely a spoken language used largely by an Anglo-Saxon underclass. However, second, Julian's theology is also 'vernacular' in the sense that she wrote for an audience of ordinary people—'mine evenchristen' (my fellow Christians)—rather than merely for monastics and clergy.

Finally, I view Julian as a practical-pastoral theologian precisely because of her purpose in writing theology. It addresses the often painful experiences of her fellow Christians, including the pain brought about by sin, and offers a rich alternative understanding of the nature of God and of human identity in the sight of God. 'So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be . . . and in this love our life is everlasting' (Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love* 86; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 342).

JULIAN'S ANTHROPOLOGY

The interrelated elements of mystical anthropology mentioned earlier, that is self-forgetfulness and a divinely-guided process of 'becoming,' are strongly present in Julian's writings. Equally, as already noted, Julian's anthropology has both a clearly 'positive' or kataphatic approach and also 'negative' or apophatic elements.

In Julian's theology her complex binary (but not dualistic) portrayal of human identity in terms of the dimensions of 'substance' and 'sensuality' echoes Augustine's anthropology to some degree. However, the fundamental source of Julian's highly original theological reflection in *A Revelation of Love* is what she believes was revealed to her by God initially through her visions and then through her subsequent contemplative reflection.

In Julian her theological anthropology is rooted directly in her understanding of God-as-Trinity. The mutual indwelling of God in us and us in God permeates her theological vision. Indeed, according to Julian we cannot truly know our self unless we first cease to be self-preoccupied and open ourselves to God who guides us in the process of becoming.

For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united. But nevertheless I saw that we have, naturally from our fullness, to desire wisely and truly to know our own soul, through which we are taught to seek it where it is, and that is in God.

(*A Revelation of Love* 56; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 288)

Julian's original visions or 'revelations' are focused primarily upon the Passion of Jesus. Julian recognises that everything she was taught was grounded in the first revelation of Jesus' suffering and bleeding on the Cross (Chapters 2–9). As a result, the whole of Julian's theology of human identity finds its focus in the self-emptying of Christ's Passion. Her teachings on God as Trinity, on creation and on Incarnation are ultimately measured by the standard of the Cross and flow naturally into her anthropology. The Passion is understood fundamentally as the supreme revelation of the love of God.

God's love is not simply an emotion or an action for love is not something God 'does' or 'has.' Love is God's very nature and it is directed outwards towards humanity. In other words, for Julian, self-giving love is God's entire reality. Julian does not provide a systematic structure to help us to understand what this means. Her pedagogical approach is to begin with the Passion, expressed in visionary form, and then to proceed by means of other images and stories. In this way, Julian is able to teach a deeper wisdom beyond the language of logic. *A Revelation of Love* begins with an overwhelming image of self-giving love manifested in the face of the crucified Jesus and which is to be the measure of human existence as a process of self-forgetfulness and openness to the Divine.

The result of the visions was to find in this broken human figure the reality of God. Yet, at the same time, to see God mediated through the bodily suffering of Jesus also paradoxically serves to preserve the otherness of God - transcendence in the immanence. 'I perceived, truly and powerfully, that it was he who just so, both God and man, himself suffered for me, who showed it to me without any intermediary' (*A Revelation of Love* 4; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 181).

Thus, in Jesus Christ, the creation, life and eternal future of humanity is caught up into the life of God-as-Trinity.

And in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy, and I understood that it will be so in heaven without end to all who will come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our endless joy and our bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ.

(*A Revelation of Love* 4; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 181)

On the cross, the love of God for humankind is shown to be a parallel of the love relationship within the Trinity—a dynamic and mutual indwelling in which each person of the Godhead is constantly sharing life with the others. This way of being is also revealed as afflicted love, united through suffering to all humanity. From the vision of Jesus Christ on the cross Julian learned that humanity is filled with God and enclosed by God. Through the cross, God offers intimacy or ‘familiar love.’

Julian regularly employs paradoxical language. As second person of the Trinity, Christ is impassable. And yet, as united to the human condition, Christ is said still to have the thirst and longing that he had upon the cross. This will remain the case ‘until the time that the last soul which will be saved has come into his bliss.’ Then Julian is bolder still. There is longing and desire *in God* and this quality is part of God’s everlasting goodness. ‘For as truly as there is in God a quality of pity and compassion, so truly there is in God a quality of thirst and longing And this quality of longing and thirst comes from God’s everlasting goodness’ (*A Revelation of Love* 31; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 231).

Because God is united to the human soul, this notion of God’s thirst explains our own longing and desire. God in Christ thirsts for us and because of our union with God we also thirst for God. Just as Christ’s spiritual thirst is God’s painful longing for us, so the longing and yearning we experience is God’s desire within us, leading us ever onwards towards our ultimate destiny in the mysterious depths of God.

God’s thirst is to have man, generally, drawn into him, and in that thirst he has drawn his holy souls who are now in bliss. And so, getting his living members, always he draws and drinks, and still he thirsts and he longs. I saw three kinds of longing in God, and all to the same end, and we have the same in us, and from the same power, and for the same end.

(*A Revelation of Love* 75; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 326)

For Julian the simple fact is that, in her understanding of the Passion, the Trinity as a whole participate in all activities relating to salvation which is part of the eternal ‘economy’ of God even if only the ‘virgin’s Son’ may be said to suffer. ‘All the Trinity worked in Christ’s Passion, administering abundant virtues and plentiful grace to us by him; but only the virgin’s Son suffered, in which all the blessed Trinity rejoice’ (*A Revelation of Love* 23; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 219). The participation of the Trinity in salvation is also strongly implied in Chapter 11 where Julian sees God ‘in a poynte.’² Here, God is seen to be in all things, as doing all things and as bringing them to their preordained conclusion.

And therefore the blessed Trinity is always wholly pleased with all its works; and God revealed all this most blessedly, as though to say: See I am God. See, I am in all

² Although the Middle English ‘poynte’ is translated by Colledge and Walsh as ‘an instant of time’ the chapter overall is more suggestive of a spatial image. ‘By which vision I saw that he is present in all things; ‘for he is at the centre of everything’ (Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 197).

things. See, I do all things. See, I never remove my hands from my works, nor ever shall without end. See, I guide all things to the end that I ordain them for, before time began, with the same power and wisdom and love with which I made them; how should anything be amiss?

(*A Revelation of Love*, 11; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 199)

In her famous teaching on Jesus as Mother (imaging generativity and loving-kindness) Julian is radically Trinitarian. Jesus as Mother is not to be distinguished from the Father as Ruler or Judge. Ultimately, the Trinity is our Mother. Julian maintains a delicate balance between distinguishing the persons of the Trinity from each other and, on the other hand, depersonalizing matters so as to deal only with abstract 'attributes.' Thus, as Julian 'contemplated the work of all the blessed Trinity' (*A Revelation of Love*, 58; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 293) she saw the three 'properties' of fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship 'in one God.' Our essential human nature (what she calls our 'substance') dwells equally in each person and in all the persons together.

And our substance is in our Father, God almighty, and our substance is in our Mother, God all wisdom, and our substance is in our Lord God, the Holy Spirit, all goodness, for our substance is whole in each person of the Trinity, who is one God.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 58; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 295)

Julian is clear about the fundamental unity of God as Trinity. 'For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our endless joy and our bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ' (*A Revelation of Love*, 4; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 181). This early statement is further underlined in chapter 23 concerning our salvation. 'All the Trinity worked in Christ's Passion, administering abundant virtues and plentiful grace to us by him' (*A Revelation of Love*, 23; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 219).

The mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity one in the other (*perichoresis*) is affirmed at a number of points, including at the end of the famous parable of the Lord and Servant. 'Now the Son, true God and true man, sits in his city [the human soul] in rest and in peace, which his Father has prepared for him by his endless purpose, and the Father in the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Father and in the Son' (*A Revelation of Love*, 51; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 278). We are drawn into this mutual indwelling, into an intimacy with God that is Julian's version of deification. She expresses this as a mutual enclosure. We are enclosed in God and God is enclosed in us:

And I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God, that is to say that God is God, and our substance is a creature in God. For the almighty truth of the Trinity is our Father, for he made us and keeps us in him. And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, in whom we are enclosed. And the high goodness of the Trinity is our Lord, and in him we are enclosed and he in us. We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit. And

the Father is enclosed in us, the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Spirit is enclosed in us, almighty, all wisdom and all goodness, one God, one Lord.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 54; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 285)

Julian seeks to articulate not only something of what God is but also something of how God sees and has shown her in part. Because of this, she offers a radically alternative vision of human existence. This results in two striking assertions. First, there is neither blame nor wrath in God (chapters 45–9). Second, and related to it, sin is ‘no deed’. In seeing God in everything Julian also sees all things in God and therefore ‘in all this sin was not shown to me’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 11; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 198). Later, as she considers how sin hinders her longing for God she is taught that she could not see sin as she contemplated the Passion because ‘it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pain caused by it’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 27; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 225). What is critical is that, in her anthropology, Julian teaches that the *essence* of human identity is not ‘sinful’. Sin is the cause both of human pain and of the Passion and yet ‘sin is necessary’ (or in Middle English, ‘behovely’—that is, appropriate or suitable). In an echo of the Easter Vigil liturgy, sin is the *felix culpa* (happy fault) that reveals so great a redeemer. In Julian’s thinking around the question ‘what is sin?’ it is somehow a providential dimension of our contingent incompleteness and fallibility. Counter-intuitively, while sin often blinds us it also at times enables us to experience the depths of God’s being-as-Love.

In the end, God ‘sees’ only the ultimate bliss that will be ours. In God’s vision this is the truth of human existence. Thus Julian, in her vision of God’s eye-view, cannot see sin even though she knows its impact on human life and experience. However, as the parable of the Lord and the Servant makes clear (*A Revelation of Love*, 51), it all depends on this difference in ways of seeing. The parable is a response to Julian’s questions about sin and why she cannot see it when she contemplates all reality in God. The point is that God looks on human beings and their failings with unending love and compassion and not with blame.

In the parable, a servant, running in haste to serve his lord, falls into a ditch. The fallen servant then sees neither his loving lord who remains nearby ‘nor does he truly see what he himself is in the sight of his loving lord’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 51; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 271). We do not see ourselves truly. Indeed, as Julian suggests in the next chapter, ‘God sees one way and man sees another way’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 52; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 281). Essentially God can only see humanity in the light of his Son. ‘When Adam fell, God’s Son fell [into Mary’s womb]; because of the true union which was made in heaven, God’s Son could not be separated from Adam, for by Adam I understand all mankind’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 51; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 274). Julian finally understands the parable when she is granted an insight into how God sees humankind.

From this standpoint, the story of Adam’s fall and of Christ’s ‘fall’ (the incarnation) are inextricably linked—even somehow a single event. The moment of Adam’s fall becomes

the moment of salvation as well. The parable is an exposition of salvation history from God's viewpoint. God looks upon us as we are in Christ and sees us in our final integrity: healed, sinless, and glorified. While, from our perspective, life is an experience of incompleteness and a continuous, mysterious process of becoming, in the light of eternity we are ever in union with God and always have been. 'And for the great endless love that God has for all mankind, he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved' (*A Revelation of Love*, 54; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 285).

SUBSTANCE AND SENSUALITY

Julian's most extensive exposition of human identity appears in the chapters immediately following the parable of the Lord and the Servant. As already noted, Julian's anthropology is complex, binary, but not dualistic. We need to understand what Julian means by her two dimensions of the 'soul' or of human identity: 'substance' and 'sensitivity' (especially chapters 54–9). These dimensions have a number of connotations but certainly do not mean 'spirit' or soul versus 'matter' or body. The concepts of substance and sensitivity bear some resemblance to Augustine's concept of the higher and lower parts of the soul, understanding 'soul' as human identity (see Jantzen 2000: 137–49; Nuth 1991: 104–16).

Julian does not consider embodiment in any systematic or extensive way. However, she is free from any statements that devalue the body. Indeed, in chapter 6 God is involved in even the most basic of bodily functions and Julian uses this as an image of God's care and service of humanity!

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for love of the soul which he created in his own likeness.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 6; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 186)

Fundamentally, substance is the essence of our humanity that is by nature for ever united to God. It is also the self that God persistently 'sees'. In Chapter 53 Julian writes of the 'godly will'. This will, 'which never assented to sin nor ever will', is an aspect of what Julian calls our 'substance' (*A Revelation of Love*, 53; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 283). Julian, echoing Augustine's anthropology, also adopts the notion of the *imago Dei*. The human person, whether female or male, is created in the image of God-the-Trinity (chapter 10) and this is humanity's true nature—a sharing in the nature and substance of

God. The *imago Dei* within us does not imply that human existence is static and also counters any tendency towards a self-preoccupied interiority. On the contrary, as already noted, we have a dynamic tendency to return to God our origin. Thus our substance 'could never and should never be parted from him [God]' (*A Revelation of Love*, 10; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 195). Chapter 54 develops the theme further. God dwells in our soul and our soul, while created, 'dwells in God in substance, of which substance, through God, we are what we are' (*A Revelation of Love*, 54; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 285). Julian then offers a radical understanding of substance.

And I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God, that is to say that God is God, and our substance is a creature in God.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 54; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 285)

There is a mutual indwelling between God and the essence or substance of human beings. 'Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul; and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God' (*A Revelation of Love*, 54). God and the human soul are united and mutually indwell from the first moment the human soul is created.

Broadly speaking, the dimension of human identity that Julian calls 'sensuality' is changeable (chapter 45). Sensuality expresses our incompleteness: 'in our sensuality we are lacking' (*A Revelation of Love*, 57; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 291). However, this is not to be confused with simply being flawed. Rather we are a 'work in progress' which will be ultimately completed by God in heaven. In that sense, sensuality stands for that element of human existence that is necessarily a dynamic and evolutionary process rather than a static fixity. Indeed, our sensuality is precious. In and through Christ God is in our sensuality.

I also saw that God is in our sensuality, for in the same instant and place in which our soul is made sensual, in that same instant and place exists the city of God, ordained for him without beginning. He comes into this city and will never depart from it, for God is never out of the soul in which he will dwell blessedly without end.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 55; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 287)

That honourable city in which our Lord Jesus sits is our sensuality, in which he is enclosed... (*A Revelation of Love*, 56; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 289)

Sensuality may also stand for the self that we see in our bodily, historical, context-specific lives. Neither image of 'the self', whether substance or sensuality, is exclusively true. However, neither is untrue. The paradox of the human self is somehow caught in the image of 'the crown'. We are God's crown. That is a crown of thorns as Jesus Christ suffers for our sins (chapter 4) and a crown of glory 'which crown is the Father's joy, the Son's honour, the Holy Spirit's delight, and endless marvellous bliss to all who are in heaven' (*A Revelation of Love*, 51; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 278).

Julian's imaging of human identity is essentially positive, grounded as it is in her experience of God-as-love provoked by her dramatic visions of the sufferings of Christ on the cross. As Julian sees it, the cross is both a sign of our need for healing and of our basic worth 'in God's sight'.

‘NEGATIVE’ OR APOPHATIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Turning now to ‘negative’ or apophatic anthropology, this relates closely to the interconnected elements of self-forgetfulness or self-emptying and to an incomplete process of becoming. In the minds of many people, the imagery used by Julian of Norwich precludes thinking of her in apophatic terms. However, I suggest that Julian’s mystical insights also express this second approach to anthropology. Most immediately this applies to her theology of how God relates to humanity. Thus, while the final chapter 86 indicates yet again that ‘Our Lord’s meaning is love’, and only love, on another level, as the same chapter also underlines, Julian’s book, while begun by God’s gift of ‘seeing’, is ‘not yet completed [or performed]’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 86; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 342). Her own theological journey is necessarily incomplete because her mystical theology takes us to the boundaries of the knowable to touch what cannot be known. There is always and necessarily ‘a marvellous great mystery hidden in God’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 27; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 226). Her theology is at the same time one of ‘seeing’ truly in a new way and of apophatic unknowing at the deepest level. The point is that this ‘negative’ or apophatic dimension in Julian concerns not only the reality of God but also the depths of human identity because we are created in the image of God and ever united with God in our substance. The fullness of human redemption will not be complete until the end of time.

Julian’s apophatic approach to the self is hinted at in several places and several ways. For example, in the parable of the Lord and the Servant (chapter 51), the fallen-injured servant in the ditch cannot see himself truly precisely because he cannot see his Lord who looks on him with pity rather than blame. Also, as I have noted earlier, in chapter 56 the true knowledge of our own soul (our fundamental identity) is dependent on having knowledge of God, because our identity is ‘in God’. And therefore if we want to have knowledge of our soul, and communion and discourse with it, we must seek in our Lord God in whom it is enclosed’ (*A Revelation of Love*, 56; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 289).

Equally, when ‘oned’ with God, I cease to be—or, rather, discover myself not to be—a ‘self’ apart from God in the sense of an individualized and free-standing self. Julian echoes Augustine in seeing our deepest self, symbolized as the ‘heart’ in Augustine and our ‘substance’ in Julian where I am at one with God, as the true ‘I am’. In our highest powers, our ‘substance’, we become by grace a ‘self’ that cannot be distinguished from God except that we are created and God is not created.

Our soul is created to be God's dwelling place, and the dwelling place of the soul is God, who is uncreated. It is a great understanding to see and know inwardly that God, who is our Creator, dwells in our soul, and it is a far greater understanding to see and know inwardly that our soul, which is created, dwells in God in substance, of which substance, through God, we are what we are.

(*A Revelation of Love*, 54; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 285)

In essence, Julian is not given conclusive knowledge-as-fact but persistently senses a 'surplus of meaning' to which she needs to return again and again. 'So I saw him [God] and sought him, and I had him and I lacked him; and this is and should be our ordinary undertaking in this life, as I see it' (*A Revelation of Love*, 10; Colledge and Walsh 1978a: 193).

Within the wider Western mystical theological tradition, 'negative' or apophatic theology does not refer simply to our understandings of God. It also inevitably embraces theological anthropology. For example, the German Dominican preacher and theologian, Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1328) is regularly interpreted as the archetypal medieval exponent of a 'negative' theology (see McGinn 2005: 94–194). For Eckhart, there is a fundamental abyss separating us from the mystery and transcendence of God. Hence there must be a necessary negation or denial of our concepts of 'God' in order to touch the divine 'ground' itself (*grunt*)—what may be thought of as the God beyond 'God'. Ultimately in Eckhart, God is unknowable and unnameable. However, the human soul in its *grunt* is absolutely one with God. Consequently, the human soul must also be nameless and unknowable. As Eckhart expresses it, 'Whoever would name the soul according to her simplicity, purity and nakedness, as she is in herself, he can find no name for her' (Eckhart pr. 17 (Quint); Walsh and McGinn 2009: 148).

This 'negative' or apophatic anthropology radically denies that I am 'a self' in an autonomous, free-standing sense. In the fullness of our union with God, there is no radical distinction between that 'self' and the God with whom, in Julian's language, we are 'oned'.

The anonymous author of another fourteenth-century English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, also expresses clearly what is known as an 'apophatic' or negative theology (see Spearing 2001). As the author suggests, on the contemplative journey we arrive at a 'cloud of unknowing', an absence of all intellectual, imaginative, or rational activity and simply rest in darkness.

But now you ask me, 'how am I to think of God himself, and what is he?' And to this I can only answer 'I do not know.' For with your question you have brought me into that very darkness and that very cloud of unknowing that I want you to be in yourself. . . . And so I wish to give up everything that I can think and choose as my love the one thing I cannot think. For he [God] can well be loved but he cannot be thought. . . . In the work of contemplation it [i.e. thought] must be. . . covered with a cloud of forgetting. . . beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love and do not give up whatever happens.

(*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 6; Spearing 2001: 27–8)

Chapters 43–50 of *The Cloud* also suggest a necessary and radical annihilation of ‘the self’. Anything under God needs to be left behind in a cloud of forgetting. This includes all knowing and feeling of ourselves (chapter 43).

MYSTICISM AND LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

The third and final form that anthropology takes in the context of mystical theology may be described as ‘liberationist’. Twentieth-century theology has included a shift towards an emphasis on God’s relationship with social and political realities. A true desire for God, as well as theological reflection, must involve a participation in God’s mission to create solidarity between human beings and to promote societies that are just and inclusive. As a consequence, a theology that engages with the mystical, the contemplative path, and an engagement with social justice are not to be regarded as distinct, let alone opposed to each other. Rather, they need each other. In this context, the relationship between the mystical tradition and socially critical theological reflection on the human condition among liberationist theologians is particularly striking and, to some people, somewhat paradoxical.

Liberation theology originated in the late 1960s and 1970s in the Spanish-speaking cultures of Central and Latin America. Subsequently, the term came to be used in other parts of the world, particularly in Asia and Africa. In terms specifically of theological anthropology, an important key in liberation theology in all its cultural forms is the emphasis on the inherently social or communitarian nature of human identity. This contrasts strongly with theological anthropologies based on an assumption that the fundamental nature of human identity is essentially individual (see Faus 1993: 497–521).

It is important to note that liberation theology, not least its anthropological elements, built upon important themes in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5). In *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) there is an explicit anthropological component. It suggests that one of the most fundamental of all questions is ‘What is humanity?’ (section 10). In section 12, ‘Man [or Humanity] as the Image of God’, the document offers the critical insight that:

God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning ‘male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1, 27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts. (*Gaudium et Spes*, section 12; Flannery 1992: 913–14)

An important characteristic of liberation theology is to reflect on personhood. A basic assumption is that the proper identity and therefore the fundamental vocation of

every human person is to be a subject who is capable of acting upon and transforming the world. However, to take the example of Latin America, the majority of the inhabitants were not 'subjects' in this sense. They were really 'non-subjects' in that the structures of society did not de facto recognize or consider them. This numerical majority of people in Latin America were (and arguably still are) therefore dehumanized by being marginalized, disempowered, stripped of status, and made 'objects' to be exploited ruthlessly by other people's actions.

The Chilean theologian Segundo Galilea has written significantly concerning the mystical dimension of responses to injustice. He suggests that there needs to be a movement away from purely ethical or structural responses towards the truly spiritual experience of discovering the compassion of God incarnate in the poor. Human beings may only find the true compassion needed to create structures of radical social change by a self-emptying contemplative process of entering into Jesus' own compassion. In other words, only the cultivation of contemplative-mystical awareness as the basis for social action has the capacity to bring about the transformation needed for a lasting human solidarity—particularly one that embraces the oppressors as well as those who are oppressed. According to Galilea, social engagement must be accompanied by interior transformation and liberation from self-seeking. This is the heart of what he terms 'integral liberation' (see Galilea 1985). However, Galilea notes that not all forms of mystical thought are helpful in this regard. For example, he is highly critical of a certain type of Neoplatonic mysticism and mystical theology.

It has...a strongly transcendent orientation and neglects bodily, historical, temporal mediations. It tends to make of contemplation an ascent to God in which the temporal sphere is gradually left behind until an exclusive absorption in God is reached. This tendency can easily become a form of escape. (Galilea 1981: 531)

Galilea calls for a reformulation of the idea of the mystical and of mystical theology not least in relation to human identity. At the heart of the mystical tradition is a process of self-forgetfulness rather than a preoccupation with the cultivation of self-absorbed interiority. The teachings of the great mystics and mystical theologians consistently relate mysticism to the classic Christian theme of the cross.

This implies the crucifixion of egoism and the purification of the self as a fundamental aspect of contemplation. This crucifixion of egoism in forgetfulness of self in the dialectic prayer-commitment will be brought to fulfilment both in the mystical dimension of communication with Jesus in the luminous night of faith, and also in the sacrifice which is assumed by commitment to the liberation of others. The 'death' of mysticism and the 'death' of the militant are the two dimensions of the call to accept the Cross, as the condition of being a disciple. (Galilea 1981: 535–6)

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, now a Dominican, is in many ways one of the most iconic figures in the liberation theology tradition. He too draws upon

mystical thinking (especially Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius Loyola) in his writings. Gutiérrez played a leading role at the famous Latin American bishops' conference at Medellín (1968) which translated the ideas of the Second Vatican Council into the Latin American context. Gutiérrez's seminal *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) set the tone for the development of liberationist thought among a range of other theologians, both Catholic and Protestant. A further book, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (1983) related his thinking specifically to the area of spirituality. It firmly underlines both the inherently collective nature of human identity and also that spirituality, theology, and social action must form a continuum.

The Spanish writer on political and liberation theologies, Gaspar Martinez, notes that the writings of the German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–84) had a major influence on the theological project of Gustavo Gutiérrez. In addition, they were overall a vitally important turning point in twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology (Martinez 2001: chapters 1 and 3). What we might call 'the mystical' is present in inchoate ways throughout Rahner's theology alongside his rich philosophical thought and becomes explicit at certain points, for example in the final pages of his *Spirit in the World* (Martinez 2001: 6).

The crucial aspect of Rahner in terms of liberation theology is the unity between 'being' and knowing, self-possession and reflection. To put it another way, without a consciousness of the self no knowledge is possible. Another important Rahnerian insight is the essential openness of the human self to the transcendent, beyond what is concretely known. This 'openness to being as such' is the ground that constitutes the subjectivity of the human person. The experience of transcendence is present throughout everyday life. Even if this experience is frequently unnoticed, it is the ground of every meaningful human action. Thus, 'the mystical' is not exceptional but is part of every person's life—indeed, is co-natural to being a person (see Martinez 2001: 7, 9–10).

For Gutiérrez, spirituality, not least its mystical dimensions, is the source of true theology. The heart of spirituality is the practice of discipleship and this practice of discipleship involves a turn to 'the other', especially 'the other' who is 'the poor', the 'non-person'. This is because the poor are the special object of the gratuitous love of God. This is a crucial aspect of the mystical-prophetic spirituality which forms the basis for Gutiérrez's liberation theology. In his own words, 'Everything begins with silence; that is the first step in speaking of God; that is the moment of listening and prayer; later the language engendered in that quiet will come' (Gutiérrez 2003: p. xviii). In significant ways this insight feeds Gutiérrez's overall approach to the spiritual dimension of liberation theology—not least to his teaching on human identity and human worth. It leads us 'to see that, in the end, what we call the irruption of the poor—their new presence in history [that is, their becoming persons rather than non-persons] means a genuine irruption of God in their lives' (Gutiérrez 2003: p. xix). In his *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, the title echoes the medieval Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux and overall Gutiérrez draws

explicitly upon the sixteenth-century Spanish mystical writers, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius Loyola.

Another significant book of Gutiérrez in this context is his *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Gutiérrez 1987). Briefly, the biblical figure of Job is Gutiérrez's great hero who seeks an answer to his experience of innocent suffering. Job knows that any real answer will not be abstract but demands that he confront God face to face. For Gutiérrez, Job realizes that his suffering is not unique but is an example of the injustice suffered by all non-persons, that is, 'the poor'. Part III of *On Job* is titled 'The Language of Contemplation', which underlines that for Gutiérrez silence and contemplative listening are paramount in his liberation theology. Job comes to realize that God's love cannot be reduced to human definitions of justice. He thus receives no response to his logical questions but rather an answer that is deeper than anything he was seeking. Job discovers self-abandonment which is not the same as sacrificing his human identity or becoming a 'non-person'. Rather, it is a decisive moment in receiving the utterly gratuitous love of God which is unfathomable and 'illogical' in terms of technical definitions of justice.

CONCLUSION

In the broad tradition of mystical theology, in its kataphatic, apophatic, and liberationist forms, the question of what it means to be human—and God's valuing of human identity—is a central theme. As we have seen in this chapter, it is perhaps most significant that a mystical theological anthropology necessarily takes us beyond what is rationally or systematically conclusive. For example, the image of incompleteness—a work in progress—is central to Julian. The ultimately indefinable quality of humanity's essence is underscored in what is called apophatic theology. Last of all, the more contemplative-mystical dimension of liberation theology underlines that the liberation of the poor from being non-persons to becoming 'subjects' capable of acting upon and transforming their world takes us beyond purely structural approaches to social justice. Silence and contemplative listening not only purify those who seek to be agents of liberation but carry everyone, oppressor and oppressed alike, into the realm of the unfathomable and gratuitous love of God.

SUGGESTED READING

Colledge and Walsh (1978a); Galilea (1981): 529–540; Gutiérrez (2003); Gutiérrez (1987); McGinn (2005): chapter 4, 'Meister Eckhart: Mystical Teacher and Preacher'; Spearing (2001).

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CHAPTER 29

THEOSIS

ARISTOTLE PAPANIKOLAOU

FOR certain Christians, the word theosis raises red flags. Divinization, to become ‘god’, sounds very pagan, and seems to transgress the ontological abyss between the uncreated and the created implied in the so-called biblical view of creation. The very mentioning of theosis inevitably conjures up images of Zeus or Thor, as well as many other mythological themes and stories that blur the boundary between the divine and the human. How could the introduction of the language of theosis into Christian discourse be anything but the ‘Hellenization of Christianity’, the corruption of the pure Gospel message?

A closer look at the history of Christian thought will reveal that theosis is very closely linked to the basic question that Jesus himself posed: ‘who do you say that I am?’ If Christianity begins with the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, Christian thought throughout the centuries is a history of debate on the answer to this basic question. The Christian affirmation of theosis emerges as a particular response to this question, one that experiences the messianic message of Jesus as the presencing of the divine, both in the person of Jesus and in the human being.

This Christian understanding of theosis, thus, constitutes one of the clearest examples of ‘mystical theology’ both in the sense of how the experience of Jesus as the Christ informed particular Christian expressions about God, and how, in turn, such theological articulations continued to shape the Christian experience of the presencing of the divine. As Vladimir Lossky said so poignantly, ‘we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth’ (Lossky 1976: 8).

This chapter will look to the past to demonstrate how theosis was at the heart of the amplification of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity and the Christian understanding of virtue.

THEOSIS AND TRINITY

In attempting to understand either the Trinity or theosis, often the first question posed concerns whether the concepts of Trinity or theosis exist in the scriptures, and, in particular, the New Testament. Regarding theosis, the relevant scriptural passages include

Genesis 1: 26–7, 3: 5; Psalm 82: 6; John 10: 34–5; Matthew 5: 48; 2 Corinthians 3: 18; 1 John 3: 1–2; and, of course, the much discussed 2 Peter 1: 4 (Christensen and Wittung 2007: 23–31, 68–94; Russell 2004: 79–88; 2009: 55–72). Scriptural passages on the Trinity include those Gospel accounts in which Jesus refers to his own person and mission, especially the witness of Jesus’ own understanding of his relationship to the Father in terms of sonship and as bearer of the Spirit of God, as well as passages about Jesus in the remaining books of the New Testament, especially those by Paul (Davis et al. 1999: 29–98; O’Collins 1999: 11–84; Bobrinsky 1999: 13–144). It is clear that later articulations of both the Trinity (*hypostasis*, *ousia*) and theosis are not to be found in the New Testament (NT), but attempting to isolate passages that might indicate the seed for subsequent amplifications often fails to see how the two theological themes become intertwined in Christian thought.

The question ‘who do you say that I am?’ is primary to the development of both the doctrines of the Trinity and theosis. The NT accounts answer that Jesus is the Messiah who, because of his relationship to the Father and the Spirit, brings redemption and salvation. Insofar as the answer to the ‘who am I’ of Jesus depends on his relationship to the Father and the Spirit, it also relates to the divine being made present. As Christians experienced the salvation offered by Jesus as not simply divine teaching or prophetic admonition but union with the Christ, his identification with the divine becomes even more solidified (Christensen and Wittung 2007: 68–92). Although we do not get a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity or teaching about theosis, the early Christian proclamation of Jesus as the Christ always included Jesus’ relationship to the one God-Father and God’s Spirit; salvation *in* Christ, thus, means that Christ makes possible contact with the divine. The earliest Christian accounts testify to the inextricable link between Jesus’ relationship with the divine and human contact with the divine.

As the history of Christian debate on the question ‘who do you say that I am?’ develops, the central question comes to be not whether Christ is divine but the degree of Christ’s divinity. Responses, however, were inextricably linked with Christian thinking about salvation *in* Christ. The relation between the two would ultimately lead to what has been called the ‘exchange formula,’ where Christ as divine Son becomes human in order that we may share in the divine or become god (Russell 2004: 106; 2009: 38). Rudimentary signs of this exchange formula are evident in Ignatius of Antioch (35–107), who was arguing against a Docetic view that Christ was not truly human, but simply appeared to be human. There’s no question that for Ignatius human contact with the divine is essential if we are to have any hope of salvation, and that such contact is manifested in the person of Jesus Christ (Kleist 1946: 63). Also important is Ignatius’s understanding of the eucharist as the ‘medicine of immortality’ (Kleist 1946: 68). Ignatius does not offer a fully developed theology of the Trinity, but he does reject Docetism by affirming the necessity of contact between divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ, for the sake of salvation—a union offered to all through the eucharist. Ignatius’s reference to the eucharist also indicates the role played by the experience of God in worship and prayer in the Christian response to questions about the interrelation between Christ, God, and salvation (Zizioulas 2011; Papanikolaou 2006). One of the contributing factors in the Christian affirmation of the

full divinity of Christ was the experience of receiving this same Christ as the ‘medicine of immortality’, and being constituted as the body of Christ in this eucharistic worship.

This Ignatian trajectory is continued in Irenaeus of Lyons (130–200), whose Gnostic interlocutors shared with the Docetists a hesitancy to allow for full contact between the divine and the human, between the uncreated and the created. Gnostics also believed that creation is intrinsically evil and that the goal of existence is to escape materiality through the mediation of Jesus Christ. It was this kind of dualism that Irenaeus argued was overcome in the person of Christ. It was Irenaeus who would first crystallize the ‘exchange formula’ by asserting that the Son of God ‘became what we are in order to make us what he is’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, pr.; Grant 1997: 164; Russell 2004: 106; 2009: 22).

Irenaeus, like Ignatius, emphasizes salvation in terms of a real communion with the divine life, mediated through the Word and the Spirit—God’s ‘hands’ (Irenaeus 4.20.1; Grant 1997: 150)—and leading to incorruptibility and immortality. Also like Ignatius, he is concerned with death and affirms, in ways that we will see again in Athanasius of Alexandria, that only a real communion with the divine can save us from the corruptibility of death. Irenaeus also shared Ignatius’s understanding of the eucharist as real communion with God, but such a communion can only be given by God. The purpose of the incarnation is such that the *anthropos* may attain to ‘imperishability, enveloped by the paternal light’ (4.20.2; Grant 1997: 151). ‘Now this is His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man so that he might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God’ (4.20.5; Grant 1997: 152).

It is clear in Irenaeus that the Son and the Spirit give us communion with God the Father and, through such communion, incorruptibility and immortality. But does this mean that the Son and the Spirit are fully divine as the Father, of one essence, or simply mediations of the fullness of this presence? We don’t have an unequivocal affirmation, but from all that Irenaeus says of the Son and the Spirit, we have the foundation for what we will see in Athanasius. The Son and the Spirit are co-existent with the Father, but as the ‘hands’ of God the Father, it is not clear whether Irenaeus means for them to be ‘God’ in the fullness of God the Father.

The work of many other early Christian thinkers could be cited here to illustrate how thinking about the ‘who I am’ of Christ was inextricably bound with the understanding of salvation in terms of contact with the divine. It could be argued, however, that the full divinity of Christ was never as unequivocally affirmed as it was in the fourth century, and that such an affirmation had something to do with the logic of theosis. It was Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373) who would restate Irenaeus’s ‘exchange formula’ in the form of ‘God became human so that humans can become god’ (*On the Incarnation*, 54, my translation). And it was Athanasius who would unequivocally declare the full divinity of Christ over and against Arius and the so-called ‘Arians’. Although those traditionally grouped as ‘Arians’ do not necessarily agree on all points, much like the Docetists and the Gnostics before them, they do stop short of affirming contact of the created—the not-God—with full divinity. Again, at this point the debate is not about if Christ is divine, or if salvation entails contact with divinity; the debate is about degree of

divinity. And in very clear terms, Athanasius lays out the stakes—if Christ is not fully divine, then there is no hope for salvation, because only full contact with divinity can save the created from its inherent finitude and from death and corruption caused by sin.

These stakes are clear in *On the Incarnation*, but also clear in the *Orations Against the Arians*, where, responding to the Arian claim that the Son was ‘improved’ and received divine sonship because of his virtuous life, Athanasius argues:

Therefore, if even before the existence of the world the Son had glory and ‘was Lord of glory and the Highest’ and came down from heaven and is always worshiped; then having come down he was not improved, but rather he improved the things which needed improvement. If he has descended to effect their improvement, he did not have the title of Son and God as a reward; rather, he himself has made us sons to the Father, and deified men, having become man himself.

(Athanasius, *Orations*, 1.38; Rusch 1980: 102, see 102–25)

For Athanasius, ‘If the Lord had not become man, we would not, having been redeemed from sins, rise from the dead, but we would remain dead beneath the earth. We would not be exalted in heaven, but we would lie in Hades’ (*Orations*, 1.43; Rusch 1980: 107). Life with the uncreated God is not possible, according to Athanasius, on basis of created reality’s own power. He argues:

For the nature of originated things was not trustworthy for this, since angels transgressed and men misunderstood. On account of this, God was a necessity (‘and the Word is God’) (Jn. 1: 1) that he himself might free those who had come under a curse. If, therefore, he was ‘from nothing,’ he would not be the Christ, being one of all and himself a partaker . . . Just as through him we came into existence, thus in him a redemption of sins might occur for all and all things might be ruled by him.

(*Orations*, 1.49; Rusch 1980: 113)

Gregory of Nazianzus would amplify this point in declaring that that ‘which is not assumed is not healed,’ meaning not simply that Christ assumed full humanity, but that full humanity must be assumed by full divinity in order to be healed.

Both in the *Orations* and in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius affirms that it is ‘reasonable’ for the Word of God to be incarnate, because it is none other than the Word through whom God created all things (*Orations*, 1.12; Rusch 1980: 74). This is an important point, in the sense that although creation is ontologically distinct from the uncreated, creation itself (especially humanity) always participates in God in some measure insofar as it is created in the image of the Word. The Word is the image of God and image of humanity, and in becoming incarnate, is not joining the Word’s self to something foreign, but rather to that which is intrinsic to the Word’s own identity.

Athanasius also argues, echoing Irenaeus, that it was necessary for the Word to become incarnate so that we may be given the Spirit: ‘through whom and from whom was it necessary that the Spirit be given other than through the Son, of whom the Spirit is

also?’ (*Orations*, 1.50; Rusch 1980: 114). The divinity of the Spirit is affirmed in the ‘Letters to Serapion’ for the simple reason that the Spirit plays a role in our sanctification, and only God can fulfil such a role. That the doctrine of the Trinity hinged on debates about the degree of divinity presenced in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is to tell only half of the story. Sarah Coakley convincingly argues that arguments for the divinity of the Spirit were not simply derivative of what was said about the Logos. Coakley states that ‘prayer (and especially prayer of a non-discursive sort, whether contemplative or charismatic) is the chief context in which the *irreducible* threeness of God becomes humanly apparent to the Christian’ (Coakley 2013: 55). She amplifies that ‘there is something, admittedly obscure, about the sustained activity of prayer that makes one want to claim that it is personally and divinely activated from within, and yet that activation (the “Spirit”) is not quite *reducible* to that from which it flows (the “Father”)’ (Coakley 2013: 112). Elsewhere she adds that it is also not reducible to that to which it responds, which is the Logos. In summary, the suppliant’s ‘total perception of *God* is here found to be ineluctably trifaceted. The “Father” is both “source” and ultimate object of divine desire; the “Spirit” is that (irreducibly distinct) enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation—that which *makes* the creation divine; the “Son” is that divine and perfected creation’ (Coakley 2013: 114).

For Athanasius, the full divinity of the Son of the Father who became the incarnate human being is affirmed primarily on soteriological grounds. If full communion were not possible with God then we would not be saved and have eternal life. It is thus with Athanasius that we have the fullest expression of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity: there is no Trinity without the declaration of the full divinity of the Son; and, the full divinity of the Son is inextricably bound in Christian thought to the affirmation of contact between creation and this full divinity of the Son. In the case of humans, made in the image of God, this contact leads to theosis. Athanasius saw the limitations of a monistic monotheism because he discerned the impossibility of contact between the uncreated and the created in such a conception of God. A monistic conception of God only affirms God’s transcendence not God’s immanence. If we want to affirm a God who is fully transcendent and whose transcendence is fully immanent, then God must be reconceived. The Christian response to this reconception is to assert the full divinity of the person of the Son who, as mediator of the full presence of God, is the manifestation of both God and created reality and the communion between the two; and to assert the full divinity of God’s Holy Spirit, who realizes this communion. The question of how God can be three and one is not really an Athanasian question, but one which will become the central Trinitarian question, beginning with the Cappadocians, and one which gave rise to the technical language associated with the Trinity, such as *hypostasis* and *ousia*. One could argue, however, that speculation on the Trinity became obsessed with the question of the oneness and threeness of God, such that it became unhinged from its initial grounding in theosis. It is when such unhinging occurs that Trinitarian theology stops being mystical theology.

THEOSIS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Early Christian thinkers affirmed the divinization of the human being and of all creation as inextricably linked to the affirmation of the full divinity of Jesus as the Christ, and, thus, of God as Trinity. However, in the interrelation between Trinity and theosis the meaning of divinization was not yet fully developed. While some of this development occurred as Orthodox Christians¹ responded to ongoing Christological debates (especially those about the relation of the two natures of Christ, the two wills of Christ, and the use of icons), the understanding of theosis also began more explicitly to inform the Christian understanding of the human being.

Although the idea of theosis is evident in patristic writings prior to the fourth century, it was Gregory of Nazianzus (329–90) who invented the term (*Oration* 4.71) and it was Dionysius the Areopagite (sixth century) who would give the first definition of it: ‘the attaining of likeness of God and union with him so far as possible’ (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 1.3; Russell 2009: 22–3). This definition contains the two elements that become the basis for thinking about the human person as created for contact with the divine. First, being made in the image of God means that there is *something* constitutive of the human being that is already reflective of the divine and which forms the basis for the human movement into the likeness of God. The constitution of this image and likeness is a consistent question for patristic authors, but there is consensus that the image of God is that which in the human is indestructible, always reflects the divine, and forms the basis for movement into a deeper participation in the divine. The second element is union with God, the meaning of which may seem self-evident, but is nevertheless understood differently by different patristic writers. If, prior to the fourth century, there is a vague notion that salvation has something to do with contact with the divine (which itself was tied to the person of Jesus as Christ and thus with God as Trinity), then beyond the fourth century, patristic writers grapple with how such contact, such union, is possible.

It was the ascetical tradition that would ultimately provide the resources for thinking the *how* of theosis in relation to the understanding of the human in terms of the tri-part division of the soul, even if the word itself does not appear in the early ascetical writings, and it was Gregory of Nazianzus who, for the first time, presented the ascetic life as ‘a prerequisite for deification’ (Kharlamov 2007: 128). Maximus the Confessor (580–662) would make explicit the goal of the monastic life as theosis (Russell 2009: 28). Maximus is well known as championing the two wills of Christ in order to affirm the full humanity of Christ and, in this sense, to affirm one of the axioms of theosis, that what is not assumed is not saved. In Maximus, then, we see the continuation of the interrelation of

¹ I use ‘Orthodox Christian’ in the broadest sense of the term to include, at the time, Latin-speaking Christians (eventually called Roman Catholics), but even Coptic and Armenian Christians, who did not accept the Chalcedonian definition of Christ, but whose sensibility about the person of Christ was indisputably shaped by the realism of theosis.

theosis and thinking about Christ both in terms of the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, but also in terms of the eternal Logos in whom exist the *logoi* that form the basis for all of creation. In the relation of the *logoi* to the Logos, Maximus places theosis at the centre of his cosmic vision (Thunberg 1995; Tollefsen 2008; Blowers 2016).

Maximus, however, was also very practical; inasmuch as his vision was cosmic, he was concerned with understanding and advising on the fundamental operations of theosis, a concern that is clearly evident in his *Four-Hundred Chapters on Love (FHCL)*. This particular text is a compilation of aphorisms whose goal is ultimately to guide the reader—for Maximus it would be fellow monks—towards a union of love and knowledge with God. Why Maximus decided to write in aphorisms is not stated, but if form has something to do with content, Maximus was at least indicating that the movement toward union with God is not formulaic. If union with God has something to do with knowledge, and knowledge of God for Maximus is ‘beyond reason’—in the sense that God is not reducible to those principles of being that the mind can grasp, even if God is the source of such principles—then through the aphorisms Maximus is attempting to keep thought on the move so that it does not become complacent and think it has figured out the mystery of God. The form of aphorisms could also be reflective of Maximus’s discernment that the spiritual life is unique to each individual according to their own unique history and context, and that a cluster of aphorisms could speak more widely to multiple readers with multiple and diverse spiritual needs. It is characteristic of Maximus that when speaking of the spiritual life, he is much less discursive than when theologizing about the person of Christ and the two wills.

Even if the aphoristic style does not allow for a syllogistic path towards union with God, there are clear and discernible themes in *FHCL*, as well as throughout Maximus’s writings, in relation to the *how* of theosis. The first is Maximus’s understanding of the human being as created in the image and likeness of God, which he maps onto his understanding of being as entailing three distinct modes: being, well-being, and eternal being. According to Maximus,

a nature endowed with reason and understanding participates in the holy God by its very being, by its aptitude for well-being (that is, for goodness and wisdom), and by the free gift of eternal being (3.24) . . . In bringing into existence a rational and intelligent nature, God in his supreme goodness has communicated to it four of the divine attributes by which he maintains, guards, and preserves creatures: being, eternal being, goodness, and wisdom. The first two of these he grants to the essence, the second two to its faculty of will; that is, to the essence he gives goodness and wisdom in order that what he is by essence the creature might become by participation. For this reason he is said to be made ‘to the image and likeness of God’: to the image of his being by our being, to the image of his eternal being by our eternal being (even though not without a beginning, it is yet without end); to the likeness of his goodness by our goodness, to the image of his wisdom by our wisdom. The first is by nature; the second by grace. Every rational nature indeed is made to the image of God; but only those who are good and wise are made to his likeness.

(*FHCL* 3.24–5; Berthold 1985: 64)

Insofar as that which was created as rational and intelligent has being, it participates in God's being, and once created, Maximus implies that it is indestructible—that it has eternal being. Such a creature bears God's image insofar as it has being (and eternal being), but also insofar as it is a rational, intelligent being with a will that gives it the capacity for deeper participation in the attributes of God.

The primary attributes that Maximus highlights are wisdom and goodness, which correspond to the rational and affective parts of the soul. For Maximus, to be in accordance with the likeness of God is to be *as* wisdom and goodness. This accordance with God's likeness occurs only through the continual, voluntary movement into ever fuller participation in the divine life. When Maximus says that this likeness is granted according to grace, he is not signalling a nature–grace distinction in the sense of the existence of a pure nature to which is communicated extrinsically various forms of grace. There is no question that, for Maximus, nature is already graced, especially insofar as it participates in the being and eternal being of God (*FHCL* 2.6; Berthold 1985: 47; Lollar 2013). Rational and intelligent created nature, however, was created for 'well-being', which is already latent in its own nature by virtue of participating in God's being. This is evident in that creation is constituted by the *logoi* of the Logos, which are God's intentions for creation, the latent potentialities of every created thing. The Fall and the domino effect of sin it initiated obstructs the activation of these *logoi* (both their individual potentialities and those that emerge from the necessary interrelation between them), which would enable them to become all that God created them to be in the Logos. The capacity on the part of rational and intelligent creatures for wisdom and goodness is the capacity for well-being, which is created being existing as God intended.

We must be very careful, however, not to confuse well-being with a state of pure nature, or with an understanding of the natural law without the knowledge of God given by revelation. For Maximus, there is no such thing—his entire understanding of being and nature is shot through with his understanding of the incarnation and with Christ at the centre of the cosmic drama. Well-being is not an acquired state that rational and intelligent creatures can claim as their own accomplishment absent the infusion of certain forms of grace. Insofar as sin precludes well-being, then the grace of the salvation offered in Christ becomes a condition for the possibility of well-being. There is never a moment when the realization of well-being, the intentions of the *logoi* of creation, is not graced, even if it also entails human willing, striving, and intentionality. And if eternal being is of the essence of rational and intelligent being, then eternal being is not conditional upon well-being. The fulfilment of the cosmic vision for Maximus is the eternity of the well-being intended for creation. But this, as already indicated, depends on the participation of the divine attributes of wisdom and goodness, which means for Maximus we must concentrate on those aspects of created being with the capacity for wisdom and goodness.

It would thus not be surprising for Maximus to talk about union with God as some form of knowledge of God. The idea that the Christian life is productive of a *gnosis* of God has a long history, and resonates with a variety of Christian beliefs and practices from which Maximus would distance himself, such as Gnosticism. Insofar as Christianity

is a history of thinking of the question ‘who do you say that I am?’, within that thinking has been a debate not so much on *whether* there can be knowledge of God, but on what it means to have this knowledge. Maximus is very much a disciple of Dionysius the Areopagite, who, together with Gregory of Nyssa, speaks of union with God as an ecstatic experience beyond all operations of the rational mind. We hear Maximus echoing Dionysius when he says, ‘When in the full ardor of its love for God the mind goes out of itself, then it has no perception at all either of itself or of any creatures. For once illumined by the divine and infinite light, it remains insensible to anything that is made by him, just as the physical eye has no sensation for the stars when the sun has risen’ (Maximus, *FHCL* 1.10; also 1.12, 1.19, and 1.100, among many other references; Berthold 1985: 36).

The concept of ‘knowledge as union with God beyond reason’ is not a denigration of reason in favour of experience. Maximus, much like Dionysius before him, is affirming that if knowledge of God is possible, then it is not like the kind of knowledge we have through the operation of the mind. God is not a ‘thing’ that can be conceptualized, which taken to its extreme becomes idolatry—projecting what we wish God to be. If God is the uncreated Creator who makes contact between the uncreated and the created possible, then knowledge as union with the uncreated is simply not like knowledge the mind has of created things. Union with God is a paradoxical fulfilment of nature beyond nature.

In fact, for Maximus, knowledge of God as union very much depends on the correct operation of reason, which has the capacity to contemplate the principles or *logoi* of being, which is real knowledge of God in the form of God’s intentions for creation. There are two poles to the spiritual life, according to Maximus: the contemplative and the active. It is in the contemplative life that a rational and intelligent creature is able to participate in the wisdom of God, one of the two attributes that are graced to created being and not of the essence. It is through contemplation that a rational and intelligent created being attains a ‘perception of the ordered wisdom to be observed in creation. This wisdom exists in the mind as simple and without substance of its own’ (*FHCL* 3.24; Berthold 1985: 64). Maximus elaborates elsewhere:

The mind that has succeeded in the active life advances in prudence. The one in the contemplative life, in knowledge. For the former it pertains to bring the one who struggles to a discernment of virtue and vice, while to the latter, to lead the sharer to the principles of incorporeal and corporeal things. Then at length it is deemed worthy of the grace of theology when on the wings of love it has passed beyond all preceding realities, and being in God it will consider the essence of himself through the Spirit, insofar as it is possible to the human mind. (*FHCL* 2.26; Berthold 1985: 50)

In describing the operation of the mind, Maximus sounds somewhat like Kant in affirming that there exists a deeper reality behind the mind’s understanding of representations. Unlike Kant, Maximus works with a Platonic psychology in affirming that the mind ‘patterns itself after each representation’ of things it receives. This deeper reality, however, can only be realized through contemplation, since ‘in contemplating them spiritually it

is variously conformed to each object contemplated, not just its representations. This progress prepares the mind for the final step, 'when it comes to be in God, it becomes wholly without form and pattern, for in contemplating the one who is simple it becomes simple and entirely patterned in light' (*FHCL* 3.97; Berthold 1985: 75).

It is through the rational part of the soul—the mind—that rational and intelligent creatures know things in the world, but knowing the deeper reality and purpose of things in relation to all things and to God requires contemplation. Thus far from being an obstacle, or hopelessly corrupted by sin, the mind's right reasoning is that in and through which a rational and intelligent creature moves towards union with God. The mind, however, must be trained and shaped by the virtues for contemplation, otherwise, its knowledge of things will be partial and thus misleading. If the final goal is a knowledge as union in which the mind is patterned after the divine light, then Maximus is asserting that such a final step is impossible if one cannot move towards the level of contemplating the deeper reality of the representations that the mind receives of created reality.

The contemplative life, which understands knowledge of God in terms of mental operations leading to wisdom, is necessarily complemented by the active life. The active life takes as its aim participation in the good, and concerns the affective part of the soul. This affective part of the soul is divided into two parts: the concupiscible and the irascible. In the concupiscible part of the soul resides desire, which draws a rational and intelligent creature toward an object; in the irascible part of the soul reside the non-desiring passions, which move a rational and intelligent creature away from its object in the form of a vice, such as anger, fear, or hatred.

Maximus would not be the first to state that the path towards knowledge of God is obstructed when the rational part of the soul is subjected to the so-called irrational part of the soul—one cannot know God if one is distracted by the passions of the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul. Maximus stands in a long tradition of patristic and ascetical thinking that affirms the need for the affective part of the soul to be rightly ordered for knowledge of God to be possible.

Whereas Maximus's predecessors would see a rightly ordered affective soul as a stepping stone to knowledge of God through the rational part of the soul, for Maximus, knowledge of God includes the affective part of the soul. For Evagrius Pontikos, whose influence on Maximus is indisputable, knowledge of God leaves love behind as no longer necessary and, thus, no longer operative. That Maximus disagrees is indicated by the fact that the *FHCL* 'is a determined rewriting of nearly one hundred passages from Evagrius Pontikos... most of which are taken from the recently discovered *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius*' (Constas 2014: pp. viii and xxviii). It is not simply that love is a precondition for knowledge in the sense that, once love of God is realized, one can then step into the realm of knowledge. For Maximus, knowledge of God always involves contemplation and love, is simultaneously contemplative and active. There is, however, a non-cognitive dimension to knowledge of God; love of God is a knowing of God that is not reducible to the cognitive contemplation of principles. One could even argue in Maximus that love is primary, insofar as in union with God, the mind's cognitive

capacities cease as it conforms to the divine light, while desire for God is infinite even when at rest in God (Salés and Papanikolaou 2017: 27).

Maximus himself testifies to the interrelation of love and knowledge throughout the *Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, and especially in a series of aphorisms in the 'Fourth Century':

57. Once granted a partial knowledge of God, do not be careless about love and self-mastery, for these purify the passionate aspect of the soul and are ever preparing for you the way to knowledge.

58. The way to knowledge is detachment and humility, without which no one will see the Lord.

59. Since 'knowledge makes boastful but love edifies', link up love with knowledge and you will not be puffed up but rather a spiritual architect building up yourself and all those around you.

60. Love confesses unabashedly its ignorance of what it does not know.

61. It is normal that presumption and envy follow upon knowledge, especially in the beginning, presumption interiorly and envy both interiorly and exteriorly: interiorly for those who have knowledge, exteriorly for those who do not. Thus love overcomes these three: presumption, because it is not puffed up; interior envy, because it is not jealous; exterior envy, because it is patient and kind. It is thus necessary for the one who has knowledge to take hold of love in order to keep his mind from any kind of wound.

62. The one who has been gifted with the grace of knowledge but still has grief, resentment, and hate for his brother is like the person who stings his eyes with thorns and burrs. Knowledge is for that reason necessarily in need of love.

(Berthold 1985: 81–2)

Maximus signals the primacy of love when at the very start of the *FHCL* he states that knowledge of God depends on the desire for God, which is love for God. According to Maximus, 'The one who loves God prefers knowledge of him to all things made by him and is constantly devoted to it by desire... If the life of the mind is the illumination of knowledge and this is born of love for God, then it is well said that there is nothing greater than love' (1.4 and 1.9; Berthold 1985: 36). If true knowledge of God is union with God in which cognitive activities cease and the mind conforms to the divine light, it is love that propels and sustains it in that state:

When in full ardor of its love (*eros*) for God the mind goes out of itself, then it has no perception at all either of itself or of any creatures. For once illumined by the divine and infinite light, it remains insensible to anything that is made by him, just as the physical eye has no sensation of the stars when the sun has risen... through love the mind is ravished by divine knowledge and in going outside of creatures has a perception of divine transcendence. (*FHCL* 1.10 and 1.12; Berthold 1985: 36–7)

Thus it becomes clear that while Maximus does give primacy to love (understood as union with God), it is not over and against knowledge, since union with God *is*

knowledge of God. In this form of knowing, cognitive perceptions and contemplation of *things* cease, since God is no-thing. Rather than being negated, the rational part of the soul conforms to the divine light as much as possible, but this conformity is propelled by an *eros* for the divine that never wavers or diminishes in union with God. In the ascent itself, however, the affective part of the soul does not step over the rational part of the soul, or vice versa. There is a simultaneity in their operations, and the formation of the one affects that of the other. The two must be in sync in accord with God's creative intent before *eros* can propel the soul in union with God. And for this syncing to occur, both parts of the soul must be formed in the virtues.

To move towards union with God, attention must be given to the architecture of the soul, the virtues that are required for each part of the soul, and the prudence that is needed for manifesting those virtues. On the virtues themselves, consistent with Maximus's understanding of the *logoi* as constitutive of created realities, Maximus affirms that:

the essence in every virtue is the one Logos of God—and this can be hardly doubted since the essence of all virtues is our Lord, Jesus Christ... Which is to say that anyone who through fixed habit participates in virtue, unquestionably participates in God, who is the substance of the virtues. For such a person freely and unfeignedly chooses to cultivate the natural seed of the Good, and has shown the end to be the same as the beginning, and the beginning to be same as the end, or rather that the beginning and the end are one and the same. (*Ambiguum* 7; Constanas 2014: 103)

For Maximus, insofar as the Logos is present in the virtues, they are not acquired or even infused, but manifested: they exist latently within creation, their potential realization obstructed by sin. Because virtues are the manifestation of rational and intelligent nature as God intended, they consist of participation in God.

Each of the parts of the soul because of distinct operations requires specific virtues. The rational part of the soul, whose operation consists in conforming itself to the object of knowledge through perception, attention, and contemplation, requires the virtue of prayer above all, which allows the mind to be fixed on God and not be distracted by attention to other earthly or material objects (*FHCL* 2.1; Berthold 1985: 46). Maximus also offers practical advice for attaining pure prayer, such as reading and contemplation, whose purpose is 'to render the mind clear of any matter or form: from this ensures undistracted prayer' (*FHCL* 2.4; Berthold 1985: 46).

Since these *Chapters* are on *Love*, what most concerns Maximus in this text is the affective part of the soul. The irascible part of the soul is prone to the vices of anger, hatred, and fear. References to these vices in the text are numerous, and it is clear for Maximus that these particular vices indicate of the absence of love for God and a transgression of the commandment to love neighbour as oneself. As an example, Maximus states that 'the one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in no way admits of hatred for man' (*FHCL* 1.15; Berthold 1985: 37). Elsewhere, Maximus advises that 'when you are insulted by someone or offended

in any matter, then beware of angry thoughts, lest by distress they sever you from charity and place you in the region of hatred' (*FHCL* 1.29; Berthold 1985: 38). Maximus also indicates that fear is not the best motivator when it comes to a relationship of love with God, even if it may be necessary in the beginning of the relationship; but, in the end, fear of punishment must be replaced by love of God for God's sake (*FHCL* 1.80–1; Berthold 1985: 44). Pride, greed, envy, and gluttony are often identified as causes of hatred and anger, and Maximus always has advice to his fellow monks on how to transform hatred and anger into humility and love (*agape*), especially through kindness or almsgiving.

The concupiscible part of the soul is the region of desire, where the soul is being drawn to move towards a particular object. In forming this aspect of the soul, one aims to shift one's desire from material things to God above all things, and it is only then that 'in the full ardor of its love (*eros*) for God the mind goes out of itself' (*FHCL* 1.10; Berthold 1985: 36). As with the irascible part of the soul, Maximus identifies particular vices that plague the concupiscible part of the soul and direct its desire to objects other than God. The list of vices is no different from that of the irascible part of the soul, but also includes love of pleasure. In the end, for Maximus, self-love is the ground from which all vices emerge: 'the beginning of all passions is love of self, and the end is pride. Self-love is irrational love of the body, and if one eliminates this he eliminates along with it all the passions stemming from it' (*FHCL* 3.57; Berthold 1985: 69). Among the virtues that Maximus indicates through the *FHCL*, two receive much commentary in relation to the concupiscible part of the soul: self-mastery and detachment, best attained according to Maximus by practices such as fasting and vigils.

Most interesting and somewhat compelling in Maximus's detailing of the affective part of the soul is that he almost universally restricts the word *agape* to the irascible part of the soul. This means for Maximus that love is not a matter of the will in the sense of other regard or self-sacrifice. No doubt, Maximus would have found Anders Nygren incomprehensible. Love as *agape* is a state of being that has something to do with the regulation and transformation of fear, anger and hatred. In fact, the markers for love are not other regard or self-sacrifice, but the degree to which one faces one's neighbor, which includes the stranger and enemy, in fear, anger or hatred. Even more fascinating is the interrelation between *agape* and *eros* in Maximus: wrong *eros* leads to the lack of *agape* since it enables fear, anger and hatred; right *eros* enables *agape*, which then reinforces and enables *eros* for the divine, on which contemplation-as-wisdom depends. Very far from seeing *agape* as having nothing to do with *eros*, Maximus sees *eros* and *agape* as mutually implicated.

This brief presentation does not do justice to Maximus's detailed discussion of the operations of the soul in its ascent towards God, which includes a definition of the passions as 'an irrational affection or senseless hate for things and representations' (*FHCL* 3.42; Berthold 1985: 67), discussion of what motivates people to act out of fear or love, lists of virtues that indicate how one gives birth to another until the virtue of love finally is manifested, and advice on how to transform the passions into single-minded desire for God. Although the aphorisms are unsystematic in their organization and insights, there is clearly a coherence to Maximus's anthropology of theosis, embedded as it is in a

cosmological and ontological vision centred on the divine-human Christ, and thus the Trinity. Virtue is at the heart of this anthropology, as the manifestation of virtue is the alignment of the soul in the direction of God. Virtue is not simply a moral category here, in the sense of the capacity to do the right action. Rather, virtue is also a spiritual and existential category which describes one's capacity to love both neighbour and God. Virtues are the building blocks of love, and hence, knowledge of God, and although they are defined as a 'habit', even by Maximus himself, they form the nexus for a momentum towards God—leading to an ecstatic union with God both in and beyond nature. We can say then that Maximus's theology of virtue is itself a form of mystical theology, for he roots his understanding of virtue within the tradition of contemplative and active union with God, grounded in Christological and Trinitarian dogma (themselves having shaped a vision of theosis), and because of his understanding of virtue's important role in the soul's ascent to God.

THE RELEVANCE OF THEOSIS FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

In the Orthodox tradition, theosis would continue to play a formative role not simply in understanding the human relation to God, but also in debates about God's relation to the world. The influence of theosis on Orthodox theologies of God was especially evident in Gregory Palamas's (1296–1359) staunch defence of the essence–energies distinction, where God is unknowable in God's essence but known in God's energies, which are divine. Unwittingly, however, Palamas introduced a tension into Orthodox theologies of God, since it was not clear how union with God's energies cohered with union with God in the Logos of God's Trinitarian being, both of which are grounded in what one might call the mystical theological logic of theosis (Papanikolaou 2006, 2003).

It was also very tempting for contemporary Orthodox theologians to define Orthodoxy over and against the 'West' by arguing that Western Christianity, beginning with Augustine and continuing through the Reformation theologians, denied the realism of theosis (Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou 2008, 2013). This impression was fuelled, in part, by a neo-scholastic attack on the Palamite essence–energies distinction, which Orthodox theologians felt compelled to defend, and which then propelled this distinction to a constitutive role in conceptualizing divine-human communion for most Orthodox theologians, with the exception of John Zizioulas and Sergius Bulgakov (Russell 2009: 13–16; Papanikolaou 2006, 2003; Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou 2008). This East–West dualism, however, forged on the basis of affirming or denying theosis, is simply false, as evidence of the affirmation of theosis is present in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and even, some would argue, Martin Luther (Mannermaa 1995; Christensen and Wittung 2007).

There is an insight, however, in the (false) Orthodox accusation of Western Christianity's denial of theosis. It is arguably the case that in some forms of Western Christian thought, theology did get separated from the mystical, both in the form of the theologian not being shaped by the experience of prayer—individual and communal—and also in the sense of theology losing sight of what Maximus clearly defines as the goal—knowledge as union with God. Why theology decided to break from the mystical is a matter of much debate, but no doubt had to do with the Western Christian obsession with justification after the Reformation, and also the pressures and challenges of modern thought.

We see glimmers of a reattachment of theology to the mystical in some expected and not so expected places. First, theosis would come to play a formative role as a grounding axiom in the re-emergence of Orthodox theology after a period of hibernation due to the Ottoman occupation of most traditional Orthodox spaces. Disagreements notwithstanding, there does not exist a single Orthodox theologian who would deny the realism of theosis and its centrality to Orthodox theology. The fact of this unifying thread within the Orthodox tradition is remarkable. One also sees theosis playing a leading role in the re-emergence of Trinitarian theology over the last few decades. It is true that theosis does not appear often in the leading theologians who have spearheaded this revival, but insofar as most of these theologians—Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine LaCugna, to name only a few—understand the theology of the Trinity as attempting to articulate a Christian understanding of the God–world relation in terms of communion, then the mystical theology of theosis clearly operates in these Trinitarian theologies, even if it is not explicitly stated.

The re-emergence of theosis in contemporary theology is not limited to theologies of God, but also to theological anthropology in relation to ethical and social issues. Theologians have explored the difference theosis makes for thinking such issues as political theology (Papanikolaou 2012; Milbank 2014; Gregory 2010; Mathewes, 2008; Ward 2009), race (Carter 2008), gender (Coakley 2013), and sexuality (Tonstad 2016). Inasmuch as Maximus the Confessor recalibrates 'virtue' as an existential category based on his understanding of the human as created for theosis, and compellingly argues that the vices of fear, hatred, and anger create obstacles for experiencing love of God and neighbour—obstacles to this same theosis—his insights into the human condition and our training in virtue shed new light on the effects of violence upon the human person, especially persons experiencing poverty or war (Papanikolaou 2018). As a form of mystical theology, theosis is not simply about the monk in the desert, on the *stylos*, or in the forest. As Maximus understood well, theosis encompasses the God–world relation, and in so doing, permeates all created existence—the personal and the social.

SUGGESTED READING

Berthold (1985); Christensen and Wittung (2007); Conostas (2014); Russell (2009).

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CHAPTER 30

ECCLESIOLOGY

GEMMA SIMMONDS

HOLINESS

'I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' runs the Nicene Creed, giving us the four marks by which the Church is identified. Holiness is as crucial a component of what it means for the Church to be Church as union, universality, apostolic origin, and outward dynamism. That holiness is not dependent on the merits or otherwise of the Church's members but on the holiness of God who, dwelling as the Holy Spirit within the community, animates, nurtures, and sustains it. It follows, therefore, that the tradition of holiness within the Church is essential to its very life and sustenance. These 'marks' of the Church have been problematic down the ages as the community of faith has proved repeatedly faithless in many respects. They must be seen instead within an eschatological perspective that acknowledges that they are never perfectly realized in the life of the Church while all believers are called without exception to be faithful to the Spirit alive within and among them. That ecclesial holiness, and the mystical tradition which is part of it, can never therefore be thought of as a specialist endeavour or privilege of religious virtuosi. Holiness is part of the baptismal vocation and is experienced and expressed through direct personal relationship with God in Christ by the power of the Spirit but also through the prayer of the community in word and sacrament and its expression in lived and embodied virtue. Holiness is thus both a personal and a corporate state in which God's life is recognized as transforming and transformative of individuals and the people of God united in God and in one another.

In the Hebrew scriptures God calls Israel into being as a holy nation and priestly people (Exod. 19: 5–6). While the history of this people proves to be one punctuated by infidelity and apostasy there is nevertheless an abiding sense of a call to holiness that is both obedience to God in terms of law and a God-given capacity to share in the divine indwelling through prayer and worship. The psalms and the prophetic and wisdom traditions insist that holiness is a response to the God who calls humanity to imitate the

divine holiness (Lev. 11: 44) in worship but also in justice and compassion and in a vocation to be light to the nations (Isa. 49: 6).

GOD'S INDWELLING

The Venerable Bede remarks that 'Every day the church gives birth to the church' (1830: 166). In that sense each generation of the Church builds on the life and witness of previous generations within their practice of holiness, both acknowledged and hidden. A mystical ecclesiology recognizes the indwelling of God within the lives of those baptized into Christ while an ecclesiological mysticism recognizes that the holiness of the individuals who make up the community of the faithful belongs not to those individuals alone but is a gift given by God for the sake of the whole body. The Pauline, Johannine, and apocalyptic biblical traditions speak of the Church in terms of holiness. The Church is the spotless bride of Christ, coming down from Heaven (Rev. 21: 2), it is the body of Christ (Rom. 12: 5), a body simultaneously broken and sacrificed and also gloriously raised up. For Paul especially, baptism entails an entry into and a mystical participation in the new covenant founded on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6: 4). The fruits of Christ's risen life are to be seen not only in the lives of those who have received the Spirit as a 'new creation' but in the cosmos itself, liberated as is humanity from its subjection to futility (Rom. 8: 20). The Church follows Jesus in patterns of incarnation, kenosis, and eschatology and these patterns are detected in the sacramental life of the Church and in the living embodiment of the life of grace. In John the emphasis is less horizontally on the new covenant constituting the body of the risen Christ than vertically on the love relationship based on the union with God which is made possible in Christ. Christians are those who live in the dispensation of the new commandment of love (John 13: 35) and express this love mysticism in their love for one another (I John 4: 16).

THE MYSTICAL BODY

The unity of the Church is patterned on the oneness of God which is differentiated and relational. The baptized share in the holiness of Christ through participation in the eucharist, which gathers all communities of the faithful into one in Christ. For this reason Henri de Lubac writes that the eucharist makes the Church but also that the Church makes the eucharist (de Lubac 1986: 134). The sacraments are social and it is within the sacramental life of the Church that human beings find themselves brought to union not only with the unseen God but with one another, whether in terms of community in the here and now or of communion with the body of Christ constituted of those who have died in faith. De Lubac's study of the evolution of the term 'mystical body' reminds us

of the language of mysticism used by Augustine and many of the earliest Christian theologians in speaking of the eucharistic foundations of ecclesiological understanding:

Since then you are the body of Christ and His members, it is your mystery that is placed on the Lord's Table; it is your mystery that you receive . . . Be what you see and receive what you are. (Augustine, *Sermon* 272; Mersch 1949: 426–7)

Augustine, building on Paul's body of Christ theology, sees Paul's image of the Church not simply as an analogous description of the Church but as descriptive of Christ himself, whose fullness is revealed in the Church as the *Christus totus*. In this sense the baptized have not only become Christian, they have become Christ. Augustine frequently uses Matthew 25: 31–46 and Acts 9: 4 to argue that 'He too is us', that Christ entirely identifies with us and thus we should entirely identify with one another in a practical mysticism of love achieved by grace through participating in the life of Christ. This sense of mystical union in Christ is carried over not only into the eucharist but into an entire theology of the priesthood of all believers whereby Christ speaks when the Church speaks, prays and suffers when the Church prays and suffers, and the members of the body bind and loose one another in Christ's reconciling sacrifice (Van Bavel 1998: 84–94 *passim*).

SIN AND HOLINESS

In the midst of the Donatist crisis Augustine knew better than anyone that the holiness of the Church and the effectiveness of its sacraments cannot be dependent on the holiness of its clergy and members, but this question has remained a neuralgic point down the course of history. The polemics of the Reformation threatened the oneness and catholicity of the Church by challenging its holiness. There is no doubt that the reformers found ample evidence of a life that was anything but holy among both clergy and laity, and would not accept the disconnect between the sacramental life and the lived moral example (or otherwise) of the community and its leaders. Luther's emphasis on the biblical understanding of the priesthood of all believers was refined into the Calvinist understanding that all those called by Christ are called to share in his threefold office as prophet, priest, and king. The Roman Catholic Church came to adopt a sharply differentiated ecclesiology in which holiness was ranked in hierarchical terms among clergy, religious, and laity, but moved in the Second Vatican Council to a strong articulation of this universal call to holiness, stating that:

All Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth. (*Lumen Gentium*, 40; Flannery 1996)

In the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the Council recognizes that within the Church lie gifts that are 'both hierarchic and charismatic', so that the divine holiness

is mediated both through the structural elements of the Church such as its offices, liturgy, and devotional tradition but also through the charismatic gifts given to individual believers. The baptized, through the indwelling of the Trinity, 'are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood [... who] should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God' (*Lumen Gentium*, 10).

CHARISM AND HIERARCHY—AN ENDURING TENSION

Historically there have been numerous tensions between the mystical/charismatic and the hierarchical elements within the Church, resulting in the persecution and suppression of mystical works or movements along with their authors. This is perhaps particularly true of individuals and movements among women, deprived historically of any significant hierarchical power and instead claiming the power of mystical experience. Tensions between the leadership of the overall community and the claim of some of its members to secret *gnosis* is nothing new and was present already within the sub-apostolic Church (1 John 2) and subsequently. Thus while from biblical times the Church has claimed a mystical understanding of itself, the claim of any of its members to mystical encounter with God or knowledge of the mysteries of God has been subject to testing and investigation by those claiming hierarchical oversight or theological authority. In more recent times revelations of the sinfulness of the Roman Catholic Church and its abuse of power prompted Pope John Paul II to seek forgiveness for the Church's failings. Such was the anxiety caused by these repeated apologies that the International Theological Commission published a document distinguishing the sinfulness of individual members of the Church from its holiness *qua* Church. The vehemence of this distinction appears to attribute to the Church a life apart from its members.

Since its very emergence from the original Jesus movement, the Church has claimed for itself a mystical identification as both the body and the bride of Christ. The faith community's earliest ecclesiological self-articulations have rested on an understanding of baptism as union with the life of the Trinity in the body of Christ, and the eucharist as the privileged *locus* of the unifying encounter of this body, understood both vertically and horizontally.

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

A synthesis of Catholic and Reformed traditions of ecclesial holiness seems to have been reached in the Second Vatican Council's affirmation of the universal call to holiness and baptismal call to all who are in Christ to a share in his threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. Modern Catholic theology, through the work of *ressourcement*, has rediscovered the more mystical ecclesiologies of the early church. This rediscovery to a certain extent

democratizes the mystical tradition while acknowledging it as a collective articulation of God's call to humanity be a priestly and holy people in imitation of the divine holiness. This 'mysticism of the ordinary', as Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner put it, stems from Ignatius of Loyola's emphasis on finding God in all things, so that everyday life becomes in and of itself a spiritual exercise whereby the world becomes the source of a practical mysticism (Giuliani 1984: 88–94; Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [SpExx] 230–7; Fleming 1996: 174–180). Small wonder, then, to find a mystical ecclesiology underpinning the works of de Lubac, Rahner, and von Balthasar, all of whom were profoundly influenced by the Ignatian *Exercises*, and who contributed to the ecclesiology found within *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*.

THEMES AND IMAGES OF MYSTICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

The Christian Church has its origin in the Jewish tradition, whereby the people of Israel believed themselves to be chosen by God to live in covenant relationship and to receive the revelation of divine wisdom through the Torah. Early Christians saw themselves not only as the new Israel, but the new Temple, made 'not by human hands' but by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit poured out on his followers at the moment of Jesus' death (John 19: 30, 20: 22–3). They believed that baptism transformed the ragtag group of slaves, pagans, and public sinners as well as faithful Jews and occasional Roman soldiery who first followed Jesus into a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (1 Pet. 2: 9) through grace received daily for holiness of life. Catechumens were taught that the baptized no longer live for themselves alone but in Christ (Gal. 2: 20) as one body in which the categories and hierarchies of worldly life no longer hold currency (Gal. 3: 28). This radical transformation in baptism was an initiation into the relationship or communion (*koinonia*) within the Trinity, bearing fruit in transformed relationships among the baptized and with the world around them. This was the mystery of God's election, made at the beginning of time, of a people made for holiness 'to live through love in his presence' (Eph. 1: 4). The letters to the Ephesians and Colossians pick up strong Pauline themes of the paschal mystery whereby Christians partake in the hidden wisdom and purposes of God:

Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight. He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning. (Eph. 1: 7–9)

Communio and Incarnation

This understanding of the paschal mystery would become the bedrock of Luther's understanding of the Christian life (Bayer 2008). The Roman Catholic ritual of baptism

tells the baptized that through reception of the sacrament they now share in Christ's threefold office as prophet, priest, and king, a notion developed Christologically by John Calvin from early church sources (Muller 2011: 14). The notion of a share in the priesthood of Christ is echoed by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 3.63.3; Bourke 1974) who sees it as an entry into the mysteries enacted within the Church's worship. Within the Eastern Church emphasis is placed on the eucharist as a foretaste of the celestial banquet and a mystical anticipation of the transformation of the world. The earliest hymnody of the Church speaks of the eucharist as mystical encounter with the divine and at the same time mystical bond within the *communio*. We find it in the seventh-century Antiphony of the monastery of Bennchar (Bangor), translated in the hymn *Come, Christ's Beloved* and numerous other ancient hymns (Quinn 1994: 64).

The mystical tradition in the Western Church has much to say about the spiritual life and the indwelling of God in the individual, whereby we become conscious of God's presence within us and within our world (McGinn 1991: p. xiv). From the beginning of the Church's history its leaders have insisted that this inward experience be tested against the incarnate embodiment of Christ, God-with-us, in his body the Church (*Didache* 11.8). The relationship between those whom the tradition identifies as mystics and the institutional Church has often been ambivalent at best and lethally hostile at worst. There has at times been a sense of the institution attempting to control the spirit for its own purposes, as we see in the trials of such mystical and dangerous figures as Joan of Arc and Marguerite Porete and in the official opposition to Meister Eckhart. But then we have other mystics, like Ignatius of Loyola, whose theology was thoroughly Augustinian and whose spiritual experiences led him to see the Church as the visible and embodied Christ to whose greater glory he and his followers offered themselves in a 'mysticism of God's service' (Schneider 1961: 300; and de Guibert 1938: 46–9). We need a nuanced understanding of what we mean by Church here as well as what we mean by mysticism.

The very fact of the incarnation places God's indwelling in the concrete circumstances of human life and within the bodily presence of the members of the Church. The first followers of Christ saw this clearly, proclaiming the concrete reality of their encounter with him.

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
(1 John 1: 1–3)

The indwelling Spirit

In Acts 15: 28, at the first major deliberation of the faith community in the Council of Jerusalem, Peter and James discern the will of God and come to a practical decision concerning Judaizing practices among the followers of Jesus, claiming, 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'. In this sentence the leaders of the faith community lay claim to the indwelling of the Spirit within that same community and its leaders. This

belief provides the bedrock of future claims to the inerrancy of the Church but also articulates the sense that mysticism can never merely be a purely 'spiritual' matter, since any true manifestation of the Spirit, while often given to an individual, is not given for that individual alone but for the whole body, and must be tested by the body. The dilemma lies in discerning not only whether the individual is truly inspired by the Spirit, but whether the body doing the discerning is fit to discern and correct in its discernment.

The notion of ecclesial life being an expression of new life in the Spirit which leads the followers of Christ to communion with God and one another is the core of New Testament ecclesiology (Matt. 27: 51; John 14: 16) and Paul's understanding of the Church as the new temple (Dubay 2008: 188). This is echoed by the Fathers, as found in Irenaeus,

Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God and where the Spirit of God is, there are also the Church and all grace. (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.24.1; 1857: 966)

Within the Pauline *corpus* human beings are seen as temples of the divine indwelling, drawn by God from all time into participation in the intimate relatedness of the Trinity (1 Cor. 3: 16). This in turn binds human beings into union in charity with one another and with the cosmos, which shares in the transformation brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8: 22ff.). In John's Last Supper discourse Jesus' parting words to his disciples stand as a commentary on divine/human relationships to be proclaimed to and reflected upon by the emergent communities gathered in his name. For these it was not just a question of using the Gospels as a form of personal catechetical resource but of learning how to experience and recognize the presence of God within the community itself. Jesus promises that he and the Father will take up their home in those who keep his word and the fruit of this intimate union will be the indwelling of the Spirit (John 14: 23–6). This theme is taken up by Julian of Norwich in her sixteenth revelation when she says of Jesus, 'in us is his homeliest home, and his endless dwelling ... and therefore the blissful Trinity rejoiceth without end in the making of man's soul' (Julian, *Revelations*, 68; Walsh 1973: 179).

Jesus' prayer in John's Gospel promises his disciples that they and all who come after them will be graced with the power to recognize the presence of God within Jesus himself and his teaching and within one another. John sees the events of the physical crucifixion as being a source of living grace for the followers of the crucified and risen Jesus (John 19: 33–7). The liturgy of the Church takes up the theme of the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ as being the birth of the community of the baptized in the hymn *Vidi aquam*, sung at the Easter Vigil.

Figures of the Church

Within much of ecclesiological discourse figures of the Church are taken from prophetic, pneumatological, and eschatological sources within scripture. Ezekiel has a prophetic/mystical vision of the new temple from which living water flows (Ezek. 47: 2) in an image

taken up, together with that of the New Jerusalem as bride, in the apocalyptic tradition within the New Testament. It is this temple that both Peter and Paul see as being built by the Holy Spirit in each one of the faithful and in the community (1 Pet. 2: 5 and 1 Cor. 3: 16). Jesus himself uses this image of living water in his conversation with the Samaritan woman to whom he reveals that the true indwelling of God is limited neither to the Jerusalem temple nor to Mount Gerizim but experienced 'in Spirit and truth' (John 4). The promise of the Spirit is given by Jesus in John's Last Supper discourses in the context of the eucharist, which is enacted by John not in the sharing of bread and wine but in Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. The Church is the holy and unblemished bride of Christ for Paul, cherished as his own flesh (Eph. 5: 25–7). This image of the Church as bride is one of mystical union, taken up in the eschatological and apocalyptic themes of the book of Revelation (Rev. 21: 2–3) and taken further in the Christian spiritual tradition of the mystical marriage of the individual soul with Christ. Vatican II's great constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, calls the Church 'the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery', echoing John's Last Supper discourse in speaking of the Church as a mystery which reveals the hidden presence of God's love for humanity (*Lumen Gentium* 3). The gifts or charisms of the Spirit embedded within the universal call to holiness are given to all members of the Church not for their own individual sake but so that the fullness of the Spirit might be found in the totality of these gifts (*Lumen Gentium*, 39–42).

Pauline Mysticism and Ecclesiology

The key to Paul's mystical ecclesiology is his understanding of the transformation 'in Christ' which he sees as taking place in the individual. These transformed believers are initiated into the community which is Christ's body. Paul sees suffering as conforming the believer into the image of Christ so that life 'in the Spirit' becomes a new and mystical life in Christ. This life in Christ binds believers to one another in the mystical body of Christ, to become an altogether new creation and new society. For Paul 'to live is Christ' (Phil. 1: 21). Such is his sense of union with Christ that he can say 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2: 20). This living of a new life 'hidden with Christ in God' means that no other social, cultural, or religious categories hold anymore, for all are one in this new creation: Jew, Greek, slave, free, woman, and man (Col. 3: 3 and Gal. 3: 28). This union with Christ within the community of believers is characterized by self-giving service (Phil. 2: 5–7) and reproducing the pattern of Christ's suffering and transfiguring glory so that nothing, not even death, can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ (2 Cor. 4: 8–10; Rom. 8: 35–9). Despite his own very clear defects of character Paul's entire ecclesiological language is shot through with a mystical understanding of the ultimate transformation of the believer and the whole universe brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 8: 19–23). While Paul urges communities of believers to leave their old life 'in the flesh' behind in order to live in the Spirit, this is no abandonment of concrete realities for

a life of mystical abstraction, although he speaks cryptically of having been ‘caught up into Paradise’ himself in mystical experiences (2 Cor. 12: 2–5). Union with Christ is characterized by a morally righteous life lived according to the fruits of the Spirit (Phil. 2: 3–4; Gal. 5: 22–4). For Paul the life of the believer is a share in the life of the Trinity and the community of believers, in this sense, mirrors the union of God in Christ, through the Spirit.

Jesus the New Temple of the *Eschaton*

Jesus himself is shown in the Gospels as revealing to his followers the nature of the ‘new Israel’ founded not on the temple worship in Jerusalem but ‘in spirit and truth’ (John 4: 23–4). This ‘temple not made with hands’ (John 2: 19; Mark 14: 58) is, in the first instance, the crucified and risen body and person of Jesus himself. This is powerfully reiterated in the story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, when Paul, galloping off in pursuit of members of the early church, hears the risen Jesus call from heaven, asking, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ (Acts 9: 4). Here Jesus and the community of human beings gathered around him in the Church, which is his body, are one and the same, as Augustine later elaborates. This theme is picked up particularly in the Mystical Body ecclesiology of the pre-conciliar period.

In the earliest period of the Church’s life Christians expected complete transformation of the world in the consummation of the *eschaton*. Something of a crisis arose when the promised *parousia* did not appear (2 Thess. 2: 1–2), but later Pauline writings equate the followers of Jesus with his body, alive in the world through mystical union. The old self disappears and gives way to an entirely new self, reborn in Christ (Rom. 6: 4–16) which lives under grace, beyond the categories and hierarchies by which the human relationships of this world are ruled (1 Cor. 12: 13). It is in the writings considered by many scholars to be post-Pauline that we find direct references to the Church as the body of Christ as well as to the fulfilment of God’s ultimate plan for the entire cosmos, a mystery to be revealed in the fullness of time (Col. 1: 26–7 and Eph. 1: 3–10) but planned from the beginning by the invisible God made visible in Christ and, through him, the Church through and in which all creation is reconciled to God.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND THE MYSTICAL TRADITION

If we look at the principal images for the Church used within ecclesiological discourse, we find many of the core images used within the later mystical tradition for individuals ‘caught up’ into a direct and intimate encounter with Jesus. Thus images of the Church as

bride, as mystical body, and as mystery abound. Paul's references to the community of believers sharing the physical sufferings of Christ becomes part of a mystical tradition which explores the union with God of individual souls who share in those same sufferings. This may be the stigmata of Catherine of Siena and Francis of Assisi or of other sufferings borne 'in Christ' by Rita of Cascia, Elizabeth of Schönau, or other mystics. This has been a major source of study of women mystics and the physicality and somatization of their religious experience and identity (Walker Bynum 1992), though there are also significant disputes around such claims (Mooney 1999; Hollywood 1994). Nevertheless in terms of ecclesiology this language highlights the way in which the community as a whole is seen as sharing in the divine self-revelation brought about by the incarnation. The theme of human longing for unity and God's desire to draw humanity into union with the divine life is at the heart of the mystical theology within the Western tradition while also being central to the Eastern tradition's notion of deification (Lossky 2005). It finds expression in an ecclesiology of mystical union which also echoes the eschatological texts of Paul and the book of Revelation.

The language of analogy operates as a bridge between ecclesiology and the mystical tradition. If for Paul Christ is the new Adam (1 Cor. 15: 45–7) the Church is the new Eve, the archetypal bride and mother, washed in the blood and water that flow from his wounded side. This notion is repeated within patristic and later medieval writing (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*; Hart and Bishop 1990: 169–85; and Julian, *Revelations*, 58; Walsh 1973: 158–60). If divine/human encounter finds its summit in mystical marriage for individuals like Catherine of Siena, there is also a marriage between Christ and the Church which appears as a heavenly bride (Rev. 21: 2). The apocalyptic and patristic notions of mystical union between the Church and Christ become the foundation of the eucharistic and sacramental understanding of the Church in the medieval tradition, which is superseded in the Reformed period by the notion of Church as community of the word, taking some of its identification from the biblical wisdom tradition. Many theologians point to a shift between biblical and patristic understandings of the Church as mystical body and a later medieval emphasis, prompted by scholastic arguments, on the eucharist as the mystical body of Christ in terms of the real presence. In the *Dialogue* Catherine of Siena uses the term 'mystic body' to include every aspect of sacramental life within the Church when referring to the wounds inflicted on it by the scandals of her time (Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 7), but later on in the text Christ promises that insofar as any soul within this mystic body is united with him to the extent of sharing in his sufferings, so the Church will be healed and consoled. Furthermore Christ goes on to say that, even while the reform of the Church's shepherds makes them 'flowers of glory', the fruit of the bride, the Church 'never spoils or is diminished by the sins of its ministers' (Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 11; Noffke 1980: 47). *Dialogue*, 115 repeats that the blood of Christ washes away all sins on the part of the Church's shepherds and is the fountain of all authority in the Church. Catherine's vision of God reflects the prevailing church–state relationship of her time, arguing that no secular authority may dare to punish the ministers of Christ, since 'the reverence belongs not to

the ministers, but to me and to this glorious blood made one thing with me because of the union of divinity with humanity' (Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 116; Noffke 1980: 216). Despite this she is remarkably forthright about the state of corruption within the same Church, arguing that false shepherds have filled the celestial garden of the Church with putrid weeds while the bride herself is thoroughly sinful. God guarantees the holiness of the Church while condemning the disgrace brought to his Son's body by evil ministers (Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 122; Noffke 1980: 126).

The Church as Body of Christ and Bride

Another image of the body of Christ as the Church is found in John's Gospel, where the wounded side of Christ is connected with Ezekiel's vision of water flowing from the right side of the temple. Many patristic and medieval writers developed this analogy through allegorical exegesis into a notion of the emergence of the Church. This would later become the basis for devotional writing about the Sacred Heart, as mystics and writers, influenced by the Cistercian tradition, concentrated not so much on the wound in the side of Christ as on his heart as seat of the divine love made flesh. In a frequently repeated patristic comparison Eve, mother of all who live in the flesh, is created from the side of the sleeping Adam, while the Church, mother of all who live in the Spirit, is created from the side of Jesus, the second Adam, who sleeps in death (Tromp 1932: 503). Bede draws on this in a verse that names the Church as the spouse that is born from Christ's flesh and blood as he dies on the cross. So within this overarching metaphor the Church is both mother and bride, as the Song of Songs sings of one who is both sister and bride (Song 4: 9). In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Bede compares the door into Noah's ark, through which all humans and animals destined to be saved had to pass, with the wound in Christ's side (Bede, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2.6.16; 1830: 108–9, lines 1265–85).

Similar metaphors and images are echoed later in the mystical writings of Julian of Norwich and other female mystics (Julian, *Revelations*, 24; Walsh 1973: 60). Julian describes the side of Christ as 'large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest there, in peace and in love' (Julian, *Revelations*, 24; Walsh 1973: 87). She equates the blood and water which flow from the wounded side of Christ with childbirth, Christ being the Supreme Mother, who suffers agony in giving birth to the new creation of those saved by his sacrificial love. Hildegard of Bingen's image of the Church as bride of Christ and Mother of the faithful depicted in *Scivias* is frankly alarming:

I saw the image of a woman as large as a great city, with a wonderful crown on her head and arms from which a splendor hung like sleeves, shining from Heaven to earth. Her womb was pierced like a net with many openings, with a huge multitude of people running in and out. She had no legs or feet, but stood balanced on her womb in front of the altar that stands before the eyes of God.

(Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 3; Hart and Bishop 1990: 69)

This is another vision of the Church as both wedded to Christ and perfected through Christ's holiness but also wounded by sin. The openings of the bride's womb are a sign of the Church's maternal kindness in making space for faithful souls to enter, while the lack of legs or feet denotes a Church not grounded in purity. This bride is always pregnant and procreating children, labouring through desire for the fruition of virtues both hidden and manifest in her saints. She remains a mystery whose secrets cannot be fully understood by weak human intellect, yet her purposes cannot be obscured by evil or wavering faith (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 3, 9; Hart and Bishop 1990: 169–72, 455). The bride is adorned by a red glow shining on her breast, which is devotion to the Virgin Mary. The bride's garment is spread, as a sign that 'in the Church the sacrament of the true Trinity will more widely expand, for it is her garment in which to shelter the faithful peoples' (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 3; Hart and Bishop 1990: 172). This image is picked up in much medieval iconography of the Virgin Mary, such as the *Madonna della Misericordia* or the *Ravensburger Schutzmantelmadonna*, where the faithful huddle together for safety beneath the mantle of the Virgin, but for Hildegard this is first and foremost an image of the Church as bride and mother.

Holiness and Authority

The mystical texts that emerge through the Middle Ages have the images of scripture at their heart, in which the prophetic and wisdom traditions, the evangelists, Paul, and the book of Revelation offer images that provide fruitful analogies for later writers and visionaries about the different gifts within the body of Christ. If in these earlier texts these gifts are seen as an enrichment, with time they began to be perceived as a threat, with charismatic individuals or groups and institutional authorities struggling for control. A brief look at the treatment of *alumbrados* in sixteenth-century Spain offers sufficient illustration.

The monarchs of Spain, emerging from seven centuries of Muslim rule, and at a time of major political, social, and religious upheaval, sought with the help of the Church to consolidate their power through the twin imposition of the Spanish language and the Catholic faith. Jews and Moors were offered exile or conversion in 1492, only for Lutheranism to raise a new threat to Catholic hegemony. With Lutheranism came an increase in challenges to the authority of the Church and the clergy as well as to traditional devotions and forms of prayer. *Alumbrado* was a generic name given to anyone considered to be setting up the spiritual authority of personal revelations against that of clerical mediation and control. The sixteenth century saw a remarkable flowering of mysticism and mystical literature, especially during the reform instigated by Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros, a Franciscan who supported the translation into the vernacular of medieval mystical texts and supported numerous women and lay men with local reputations for sanctity. Nevertheless, as the century wore on, mysticism came to be seen as a threat to the good order of both Church and civil society, as Teresa of Ávila, John of

the Cross, and Ignatius of Loyola would learn to their cost. Access to mystical texts and the Bible in the vernacular encouraged lay people to develop their own spiritual lives and claim a certain autonomy from control by a clerical caste which they looked upon as privileged and corrupt. As would happen in France in the seventeenth century with the Jansenists, this spiritual autonomy among the laity, especially women, became mixed with critiques of social and political structures and it was feared that this would lead to religiously inspired political chaos. The result was a heavy-handed clampdown by the Inquisition on any reference to personal religious experience involving direct access to God. Instead orthodox faith came to be seen as doctrinal and moral rather than experiential, with censorship of books containing 'false, evil or suspicious doctrine' becoming the strongest weapon in the Church's war against heterodoxy and religious enthusiasm (Ahlgren 1996: 6–31).

Theology and Mysticism

Even earlier than this, in the Middle Ages, a divide had emerged between school theology and the knowledge of God derived from direct mystical experience. This divide would continue down to our present day with its articulations of tension between the charismatic and the institutional Church, as if they were not essentially one and the same. But the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the universal call to holiness provides a strong counter-balance to this. The holiness of 'Christ living in me' is one of the central themes in the ecclesiology of former Jesuit Hans Urs von Balthasar, in the intuitive, instinctive, and mystical Marian ecclesiology which he contrasts with a Petrine ecclesiology of functional ideologies, soulless committees, and bitter polemics. For von Balthasar Mary is an archetype of the Church itself, living fully a virginal openness to the mystery of God's love in total availability to the divine will, which he links to the 'indifference' advocated by Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Mary's bridal response to God's Word, echoed in a contemporary resurgence of biblical spirituality within the Catholic tradition, involves a kenotic participation in daily life which builds up communion within the Church (von Balthasar 1968) and as *theotokos* she is the model for each Christian to become a 'Christ-bearer' to the world (von Balthasar 1995: 204ff.). Like his former Jesuit confrère de Lubac, von Balthasar sees contemplation as a social rather than an individual act, since it bears fruit in the transformative life of the Church. He sees this embodied in Mary herself and in those who adopt a Marian approach to ecclesiology. Much of his post-conciliar work on Marian ecclesiology is a further exploration of one of the most significant elements of *Lumen Gentium*, namely its inclusion of a chapter on Mary within Vatican II's constitution on the Church, rather than in the document dedicated to her in her own right demanded by numerous bishops at the time (von Balthasar 1993: 93ff.). Far from theology and holiness dwelling in separate realms, von Balthasar repeatedly draws attention to the necessary unity of faith and knowledge which is 'theology on its knees'. Balthasar also regrets the manner in which,

through this kind of fragmentation, the universal doctrinal insights of the mystics have been domesticated into private spiritualities (von Balthasar 1989: 181–209).

***Ressourcement* and the Holy Spirit**

Yves Congar, de Lubac's fellow theologian of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*, laid great emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the mystery of God's transformation of human life at both the personal and ecclesial levels. The *ressourcement* for which he and his companions became so famous was a return to early scriptural and patristic sources in order to find what they considered a more authentic grounding for contemporary theology (Flynn and Murray 2011). Much *ressourcement* thinking about the Church finds its way into *Lumen Gentium*. Here we find a considerable blending of scriptural and patristic vocabulary and thought about the mystical life referring also to the Church. By virtue of their baptism all Christians share in the universal call to holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, 5). Through the Holy Spirit received at baptism, the community of the baptized which constitutes the Church has access in its individual members but also as a corporate body to the divine mysteries through meditation on scripture and participation in liturgy. While later Western theology presents mystical theology principally in terms of ecstatic and extraordinary states reached by rare and chosen individuals, the early church sees the *mystagogia* as available to all the baptized who grow in faith and knowledge by the power of the Spirit. Much modern ecclesiology in the Western Church is predicated upon a renewed pneumatology taken from the traditions of Eastern Christianity.

Congar's pneumatological ecclesiology is paralleled by his pneumatological anthropology and his conviction that the mystical life of the baptized is the mystical life of the Church. At the heart of the People of God ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council lies the mystery of humanity's creation in the *imago Dei*, the fracturing of that unity through sin and the healing and deification of humanity through Christ's saving mission, experienced through the Spirit in the Church and its sacraments (Congar 1966: 11–26). In Congar's pneumatological anthropology, which shows the influence of French philosopher Maurice Blondel, the core identity of human beings lies within their instinctive longing for communion with God as partakers within the divine life (Congar 1962: 237). This echoes the anthropology in *Surnaturel* of de Lubac, who sees this longing as something inherent and not foreign to humanity's created nature (de Lubac 1991). De Lubac is supported in this by his fellow Jesuit Karl Rahner, who makes connections from his anthropological thought to Christology and, through it, to ecclesiology (Rahner 1969a).

Christ the Sacrament of God

For Rahner, who in this echoes in several ways Augustine's *Christus totus*, Christ is 'both the fullness of humanity and . . . the word which not only spoke of the love and mercy of God, but actually made them present in his person' (Lennan 1995: 24). Christ, both Rahner

and de Lubac insist, is the sacrament of God, the *Realsymbol* which makes present or real what it signifies (Rahner 1966: 237). Responding to de Lubac's own understanding of the relationship between grace and nature Rahner developed his concept of the 'supernatural existential'. By this he explored God's sovereignly free choice to create human beings whose purpose is understood in their capacity to receive God's supreme gift of self-communication. So Christ as a full human being makes real the fullness of God's presence in the material world, and God creates human beings with a capacity to know God through knowing Christ. It follows from this, for Rahner, that as Christ is the Word and Sacrament of the Father, so the Church is the sacrament of Christ, 'The Church is the body and bride of Christ who abides in the Church as the presence in the world of God's historical and eschatological self-promise' (Rahner 1963: 18). Despite this high view of the Church as sacrament of Christ, Rahner was an early proponent (in opposition to many of his contemporaries) of the sinfulness of the Church as a truth of faith. When the Church has failed to trust that the future belongs to God and sides with the rich and the powerful in order to secure its own position, wronging saints and thinkers and ignoring its own spiritual imperatives, we find spiritual death and the failure of the Church's fundamental purpose:

Every spirituality, no matter how deep, which can no longer bear both the figures of the church as virgin and as woman of sin... reveals itself after a short period as fanaticism, as the spectre of a spirituality where human beings in the end remain caught up in themselves. (Rahner 1969a: 266)

It is the saints, who truly live in the Spirit, who reveal the Church as a community of eschatological salvation and grace (Lennan 1995: 32).

The Mystical Body and the Sacraments

Henri de Lubac's ground-breaking book *Corpus Mysticum*, first published in 1944, encapsulates his understanding of the mystery of Christ's indwelling in the community of the faithful, a mystery which calls all who participate in the body of Christ to participate by that same token in the mystical life of union with God and with one another. This unifying principle is found within the sacraments, making them social as well as theological signs. De Lubac sees the Church sacramentally in terms of a body continually both sanctifying or transforming and being sanctified and transformed. He also sees it as sacramental insofar as it is continually being unified by the eucharist from which it derives its nature as a body. For him, 'The Eucharist is the mystical principle, permanently at work at the heart of Christian society, which gives concrete form to this miracle [of being made into the body of Christ]' (de Lubac 1988: 88). The sacraments of the Church are actions which mediate God's mysterious and transformative presence. Much of modern sacramental theology and ecclesiology has sought to emphasize how the sacraments are not merely religious goods purveyed to their passive consumers by expert priestly controllers

of the life of grace, but a means of transforming the day-to-day banalities of human life through a realization of the divine indwelling discerned in daily living (Boff 1985).

As well as his sacramental theology, de Lubac's ecclesiology (like that of Congar, also influenced by Maurice Blondel) is ultimately unitive, mystical, and transformative and was adopted by the Second Vatican Council in its People of God ecclesiology (Congar 1983: 120, 202). In the pneumatological ecclesiology which underpinned the major constitutions of the Second Vatican Council we find a corporate expression of the mystical tradition of divine self-gift identified within the life and work of the community of believers. De Lubac's work challenges the idolatrous mass ideologies of the twentieth century. In a way that prophetically challenges the self-determining and self-obsessed cultures of the early third millennium, it also challenges the enthroning of the self-authenticating ego. Echoing Pascal's 'the "I" is detestable', de Lubac objects to 'the swamping of the spiritual life by the detestable "I", the failure to realize that prayer is essentially the prayer of all for all' (de Lubac 1988: 16). He writes this in the introduction to his work *Catholicism*, whose subtitle in one translation is *the Social Aspects of Dogma*, although it might just as easily have been *The Mystical Aspects of Ecclesiology* (de Lubac 1988). This unity of all human beings in Christ is not some form of group dynamics, but a mystic reality which results in a 'fraternal charity, a radiant novelty in the midst of a world grown old in its divisions' (de Lubac 1988: 37, 54). De Lubac writes powerfully of the motherhood of the Church in the sense that it is the Church which gives birth to this fraternal union, but it is a motherhood in which all its members can participate through loving acts of human solidarity (de Lubac 1986: 106–7; 1982: 79, 107–9). De Lubac's identification of the Church as mother is not proof of mawkish sentimentality but an echo of Augustine's image of the Church as mother hen, continuing Jesus' work of gathering together and nurturing those he longs to save (Matt. 23: 27; de Lubac 1982: 40–1).

The Mystical Body and the Institution

Against many of his contemporaries de Lubac understands Jesus Christ as the eschatological culmination and key point of the fundamental unity of the human race. Pius XII's encyclical of 1943, *Mystici Corporis*, identifies the mystical body of Christ with the ecclesial institution of the Church as the visible social body founded by Jesus who is its head and who breathes into it the life of his Spirit (Pius XII 1943: 64, 69). Those not belonging to this visible body nevertheless may have a relationship with the mystical body of Christ through the desire for virtue to which their lives give witness. It was in this way that the Church Fathers understood the baptisms of blood or desire being attributed to those unbaptized who died during persecution or before they could seal through baptism the lives of virtue they had already embraced (Grillmeier 1967: 168–75).

Mystici Corporis's narrow identification of membership of the mystical body with the Roman Catholic Church, whether by full membership or by the conscious or unconscious desire for sacramental or other forms of incorporation into it, is seen by many as problematic. This problem was tackled at Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*'s famous

'*subsistit in*', which allows for different degrees of incorporation within the body of Christ by those not within the Roman Catholic communion (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

The danger of identifying the Roman Catholic Church with the mystical body of Christ is twofold. First, it appears to deny that any other baptized person is part of the body of Christ, and secondly it tends to elevate the Church to an undeserved status, given the unfortunate public and repeated lapses from grace within its history, and its undeniably partial fulfilment of its destiny as yet. In *Corpus Mysticum* de Lubac tackles this challenge robustly, pointing out that the patristic and early medieval eras from which he takes much of his material for speaking of the Church as the mystical body of Christ were 'troubled times, eras where disunity and hypocrisy ruled'. He is neither imagining idolatrously that what makes this mystical body is human effort, nor retreating into an idealized past or an imaginary future. Instead he writes of the Church as both a paradox and a mystery, since in the end one cannot either reduce the mystical body to the contours of the present Roman Catholic Church or fall back on vaguely mystical formulations that are deeply unsatisfactory. De Lubac's own thought in this area develops over time within his writing from a stance strongly allied with *Mystici Corporis* to one more reflective of the broader hermeneutic of *Lumen Gentium* (Wood 1998: 84–5). But despite his unvarnished view of the fragility of the Church he nevertheless understood 'the community of the saints' to be the emergent actualization of the body of Christ within its unfolding history as the community of reconciliation which is the Church (Hoff 2013: 88, 99).

A Mysticism of the Church?

De Lubac, Rahner, and von Balthasar all shared a Jesuit religious formation, so it is not surprising to find them, in different ways, reflecting on the mystical dimensions of ecclesiology, since the 'Rules for Thinking with the Church' are a fundamental (if today frequently disregarded) part of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. We can trace back to aspects of their thought the relatively optimistic ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, in which the Church is a sacrament, making real what it signifies, namely union with God and unity among human beings (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). Nevertheless, as the earlier *Mystici Corporis* makes clear, this avoids either of two polarized and inadequate views of the Church. One emphasizes, through the lens of the social sciences, the Church as a humanly structured organization and downplays the indwelling of Christ. The other stresses an exclusively mystical understanding of the Church which tends to ignore the human frailty of its members and structures, deify human beings, and misinterpret the theological concept of *una mystica persona*, which refers to Christ's union with the Church and the unity of its members with Christ (*Mystici Corporis*, 31–2). *Lumen Gentium* warns us that the signs of God's presence within the Church are also eschatological, pointing to something which escapes fulfilment in the here and now and to a God who is unfathomable mystery. This is crucial to a correct understanding both of conciliar ecclesiology and of the Ignatian 'ecclesial mysticism'.

The Church continually endeavours to make God's love known to the world in its members and in its ministries but it will always struggle with the mysterious and elusive nature of God and with the ambiguities and fragilities of those same members. Augustine faced this challenge in the Donatist crisis and we find strong traces of Augustine within Ignatius's view of the Church. No one Christian or group of Christians within a school of spirituality can become transformed into the whole Christ, but the whole body, past, present and to come manifests in all its multiplicity the Church as the holy people of God and the Mystical Body of Christ. The Pauline notion of new life in Christ as 'Christ living in me' (Gal. 2: 20) is picked up both in Augustine and in the life and writings of Ignatius Loyola, whose theological background, learned in the University of Paris, was thoroughly Augustinian. What is nowadays called Ignatian spirituality is part of the mystical tradition of the Church in terms of the personal experience of Ignatius and his articulation of that experience, but it also has an implicitly corporate and apostolic purpose, as we see particularly in two of his mystical visions on the bank of the River Cardoner and at La Storta (Ignatius, *Reminiscences*; Munitiz and Endean 1996; Egan 1976).

Ignatius Loyola's Ecclesial Mysticism

The focus in the *Spiritual Exercises* is firmly on Christ as he is met in his own body in personal encounter through the scriptures and eschatologically as the retreatant comes to share in the transformative plans of the risen Jesus for the people of God within the world (*Lumen Gentium*, 7, 8, 11, and Corella Marquina n.d.: 84–8). The meditation on the Two Standards (*SpExx* 136–48) calls for discernment through God's living Spirit of how Jesus is to be found within the world in all its complexity. The Exercises point the retreatant not only towards an experience of mystical prayer but also of self-emptying service (Egan 1987: 26). This Ignatian mysticism is Christocentric and therefore ecclesial, since the Church is Christ's body on earth (*SpExx* 365; and Rahner 1990: 214–38). The 'Rules for Thinking with the Church', which many have assumed are a rigid imposing of the authority of the Church on spiritual freedom, are in fact predicated on Ignatius's certainty of the Spirit's guidance within the Church, which makes discernment possible to both groups and individuals (de Guibert 1938: 593–6). The Rules show Ignatius stressing a mystical felt knowledge of and 'at-homeness' in the visible, historical community of Jesus, and refusing to set any dichotomy between the mystical and the visible Church (Egan 1987: 173–4).

From the prophetic and wisdom traditions of the Hebrew scriptures to the Gospel, Pauline, and apocalyptic traditions in the Greek scriptures we derive an understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ which underpins the Christology, sacramental theology, and ecclesiology of the early church. This in turn develops into a mystical language within the medieval period which shifts the focus from the people of God, living and dead, to the body of Christ really present in the eucharist. Ignatius of Loyola presents within his *Spiritual Exercises* a mysticism of the ordinary which is inextricably

ecclesiological. The recovery of patristic sources and the subsequent theological reflections of those twentieth-century theologians particularly influenced by the Ignatian tradition, as well as an openness to Luther and Calvin's pivotal concepts of the priesthood of all believers and the threefold *munera* of Christ as prophet, priest, and king in which all the baptized share, leads the Second Vatican Council to articulate, in *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, an ecclesiology that is both rooted in the biblical and mystical traditions and universal in its call to holiness.

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CHAPTER 31

MYSTICISM OF THE SOCIAL LIFE

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HISTORIANS of the mystical understanding of the Church's social life usually distinguish three periods in its development. In the first period, that of the early church, the guiding expression is *communio sanctorum*, whereby the mystery of the Church herself (*ecclesia*) is expressed, safeguarded, and brought to perfection through the common participation of her members in holy things (*sancta*), especially the eucharist and scriptural exegesis. Joseph Ratzinger names this the 'sacramental-ecclesiological' understanding of the Church as 'body of Christ', an oft-reiterated Pauline image (Ratzinger 1969: 99). The second period, the Middle Ages, marks a complex transition, studied especially by Henri de Lubac, wherein a heightened understanding of the eucharist as *Corpus verum* ('True Body') promotes a naming of the Church herself as Christ's *Corpus mysticum* ('Mystical Body')—a terminological exchange that confirms the close traditional linkage between eucharist and *ecclesia*. Ratzinger refers to this period as a time when a 'juridical-corporate' conception of the Church as body of Christ came to the fore. The third, modern period sees what Ratzinger calls the introduction of 'a romantic notion: *corpus Christi mysticum*—the obscure, mysterious, living body of Christ' (Ratzinger 1969: 99)—a notion with biblical and patristic roots, but renewed and reinterpreted in the light of specifically modern mystical experience, devotion, and violent historical persecution.

In this chapter I focus on the third period, taking my start from the publication on 29 June 1943 of Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. Appearing in the midst of the horror of the Second World War, the pope's letter responds explicitly both to a 'false rationalism' that would see the Church as a merely human institution, comparable to other human establishments, and to a 'false, [Hegelian] mysticism' that would divorce true spirituality from institutional religion (par. 9). A writing that 'changed the face of ecclesiology', *Mystici Corporis* affirms the Church's outer structure, but takes as its pervading theme 'the inner life of the Church in its most intimate union with Christ, the Lord of the Church, through the animation of the Holy Spirit, the Soul of the Church' (Powell 1967: 5).

In so doing, the encyclical silently acknowledges the work of such theologians as Emile Mersch, SJ (1890–1940) and Sebastian Tromp, SJ (1889–1975), who had researched the patristic theme of the Church as Christ's body. It also affirms and develops, however, a major motif of the so-called 'French School' of modern saints and mystics—notably, Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), St Francis de Sales (1567–1622), St John Eudes (1601–80), and Jean-Jacques Olier (1608–57)—who favoured the Pauline image of the Church as Christ's body, understood the historical life of the Church as an organic 'extension' of Jesus' earthly life, and maintained that every member of the Church, including the laity, is called to holiness. 'The temporal, vulnerable life, which Jesus lived in his personal body, was fulfilled and came to an end with his death', writes St John Eudes. 'But he wishes to continue this same life in his Mystical Body until the end of time' (Thompson et al. 1989: 295).

In the modern period of church/state separation, the lay movements stirred by 'Catholic Action', the 'Action of Catholics', and the 'apostolate of the laity' increasingly drew inspiration from the idea of membership in Christ's Mystical Body, living and acting in the world (see Bluett 1942). 'Beginning in the 1930s, in the depth of the Depression, and continuing into the decades leading up to Vatican II', observes William T. Cavanaugh, 'the links among Mystical Body theology, the Eucharist, and social justice were put forward with great enthusiasm by lay movements in the U.S. such as Catholic Action, the Catholic Worker, the Grail, and the Christian Family Movement' (Cavanaugh 2014: 393). Writing in 1942, only months before the publication of *Mystici Corporis*, bibliographer Joseph Bluett, SJ, observes: 'Discussion of the doctrine of the Mystical Body in its relation to Christian life and to Christian perfection abruptly became widespread with the advent of the last decade; and the interpretation of the science of ascetics in terms of the Mystical Body is still a rapidly growing topic' (Bluett 1942: 262). Noting this spiritual development among the faithful (a trend often associated with ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus), and referring explicitly to Catholic Action (pars. 8, 98), the pontiff in *Mystici Corporis* offers not only clarifying instruction in ecclesiology, but also pastoral 'lessons that will make a deeper study of this mystery bear yet richer fruits of perfection and holiness' (par. 17).

Vatican Council II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, echoes the mysterious, biblical, sacramental, and charismatic language of *Mystici Corporis* and includes the Pauline image of the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12: 27; Col. 1: 18; Eph. 4: 16; Rom. 12: 5) in paragraphs 3, 7, 8, and 39. Paragraph 8 uses the exact term 'Mystical Body of Christ'. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, complements that image, however, with other biblical images—for example, those describing the Church as the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21: 2, 9; Eph. 5: 25), the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3: 16; 2 Cor. 6: 14–18; Eph. 2: 19–22; 1 Pet. 2: 5), the heavenly city (Rev. 21: 2; Gal. 4: 26; Heb. 11: 10), the family of God (Eph. 2: 19), and the people of God (1 Pet. 2: 9). Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* is, in fact, titled 'The People of God', invoking an image favoured by the council fathers (chiefly for ecumenical reasons) over that of the Mystical Body (see Dulles 1989: 423–4, 429–30).

Since Vatican II, systematic theologians have paid relatively little attention to the image of the Church as Mystical Body (De la Soujeole 2014: 138). (An important exception to

that rule, to which we will return, is William T. Cavanaugh's revival of the conjoined themes of Mystical Body and eucharist in the context of political theology.) Ecclesial movements that either originated c.1943 or experienced a renewed foundation then, however, continue to influence the Church's self-understanding as Christ's Mystical Body—each of them entailing a distinctive 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2004), a concomitant theological discourse, saintly Christian practice, and mystical experience. Considering these movements as responses to, or anticipations of, *Mystici Corporis* enables a revisioning of the 1943 encyclical itself, not merely as an important explication of ecclesiology, but as a pastoral work aimed at enkindling a heroic love for Christ and Christ's Church in an age of terrible suffering. Viewed in this dialogical context, the encyclical makes a crucial and lasting contribution to the mystical theology of Christian social life.

In the sacramentality of time, the year 1943 conjoins a remarkable group of saintly figures as actual or intended readers of *Mystici Corporis*—each of whom can be seen as offering a complementary response. Founded by the Servant of God Chiara Lubich (1920–2008) precisely in 1943, the Focolare Movement embraced the message of the encyclical as a call to Christian unity, interreligious dialogue, and service to the poor. Arrested by the Nazis in 1943 for his opposition to Hitler, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), an advocate of ecumenism, wrote his thesis in 1927 on the communion of saints, anticipating in it some of the themes of *Mystici Corporis*. The year of Bonhoeffer's arrest marked also the death-date of the Jewish Christian mystic Simone Weil (1909–43). Resistant to the contagion of the mass movements of the age, Weil anticipated in her writings the encyclical's warning against the 'false mysticism' of the collective, and she influenced, in turn, the social thought of her younger compatriot, René Girard (1923–2015), founder of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (in 1990). Dorothy Day (1897–1980), co-founder with Peter Maurin (1877–1949) of the Catholic Worker Movement, discovered in the encyclical of 1943 a reason for hospitality and charitable service, but also for pacifism and non-violent resistance to state-sanctioned violence. A prisoner in Dachau in 1943, Father Joseph Kentenich (1885–1968), the founder of the international Schoenstatt Work, read *Mystici Corporis* in the concentration camp, and he quotes from it in his *Marianische Werkzeugsfrömmigkeit* (*Marian Instrument Piety*), composed there in 1944.

Writing in 1943 to such sufferers as these, Pope Pius XII reads the signs of the times as inviting a renewed meditation on the ecclesial mystery revealed to Saul, when Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus, asking, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9: 4; quoted in *Mystici Corporis*, par. 53). Sustaining and defending the Church in her trial, Christ reveals that he 'in a certain sense lives in the Church, that she is, as it were, another Christ' (par. 53). In the 'sorrows and calamities' (par. 4) of a 'long and deadly war' (par. 4), when 'great dangers threaten the whole of human society' (par. 109), the pope observes Christ suffering 'in other men, . . . our brothers in Christ *according to the flesh*' (par. 96, emphasis added)—a biblically coded reference to the incarnation, by which the Son of God 'became flesh' (John 1: 14), but also and especially to the Jews, victims of Nazi anti-Semitism, Christ's own people 'according to the flesh' (Rom. 1: 3)

(see Rychlack 2000: 196–7). Decrying the miserable, Aryan ‘return to the teachings, customs, and practices of ancient paganism’ (par. 3), the pope witnesses ‘the deformed, the insane, and those suffering from hereditary disease [being] deprived of their lives, as if they were a useless burden to society’ (par. 94). He points to the suffering of the weak, ‘the wounded and the sick, the children, and the poor (par. 93), as well as to direct attacks upon bishops, priests, and nuns (par. 43). ‘The society established by the Redeemer of the human race’, he writes, ‘resembles its divine Founder, who was persecuted, calumniated, and tortured by those very men whom he had undertaken to save’ (par. 3).

The pope endeavours to console the persecuted by reminding them that their sufferings afford them a special, bridal intimacy with Christ and a share in the fruitfulness of his passion: ‘We should rejoice if we partake of the sufferings of Christ’ (par. 2; cf. 1 Pet. 4: 13). He exhorts them to the martyrdom of heroic charity, to serve others in need, and to love their enemies (par. 74). He envisions the ‘divinely-given unity’ of Christians in the one Mystical Body of Christ as a sublime sign of hope for a war-torn, divided world (par. 4), and he proceeds to instruct the faithful about this unity. Whereas ‘the principle of union [in a moral body] is nothing else than the common end and the common cooperation of all . . . for the attainment of that end’, the principle of union in the Mystical Body is ultimately ‘another [supplementary] internal principle, which exists in the whole and in each of its parts, . . . something not of the natural but of the supernatural order’—indeed, ‘something in itself infinite, uncreated: the Spirit of God’ (par. 62), which is given to Christ’s members by Christ himself: ‘Holiness begins from Christ; and Christ is its cause’ (par. 51).

A CHARISM FOR UNITY: THE FOCOLARE AND *MYSTICI CORPORIS*

Founded by the Servant of God Chiara Lubich in Trent, Italy, shortly before the Allied bombing of that city left it in ruins, the Focolare Movement explicitly draws its inspiration for a ‘collective spirituality’ of unity (see Lubich 2006: 11, 19–22, 31) from the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* and from key biblical passages: Jesus’ prayer ‘that they may all be one’ (John 17: 21) and Jesus’ promise, ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18: 20). Recalling the rapid early growth of the Movement, Chiara wrote, ‘From this cell of the mystical body that we comprised, there emanated a light which good and simple people around us who were searching for God . . . recognized as the light of Jesus’ (quoted Povilus 1992: 42). The light and warmth of ‘Jesus in the midst’ (a phrase that names the special presence of Christ palpable within the community) inspired the name *Focolare*, meaning ‘hearth’. ‘It is a presence of Jesus that presupposes the collectivity, at least of two persons. It is the particular grace of the presence of Jesus that already lies within the mystical body, but that comes to the surface when two or more are united in his name,’ Chiara explains, adding this exhortation:

'Individual sanctity is not enough for us, we want the sanctification of Jesus among us, of Jesus-us' (quoted Povilus 1992: 52, 134 n. 79).

The young foundress—a group leader in Catholic Action and a member of the Franciscan Third Order—vowed her virginity to Christ in a simple, private ceremony on 7 December 1943, sensing that her personal vocation was not to religious life in a convent, to marriage, or to a consecrated singleness in the world, but to a 'fourth way': membership within a new, largely lay community, dedicated to the 'Ideal' of God-Love. Chiara and her young friends read the prayer of Jesus 'that they may all be one' (John 17: 21) by candlelight in an air-raid shelter in 1944, and it became the watchword for the Movement that rapidly grew up around them, as they made the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer the object of their own desire, the goal of their life (see Torno 2012: 23–4, 27–9).

In the early years of the Focolare, the members pursued this goal of unity concretely through practising a community of goods with the poor, unsheltered people of Trent, sharing everything they had and accepting donations for distribution to the needy. They meditated together on the Gospels as the Word of Life, passage by passage, and they attempted to live the commandment to love God and neighbour through corporal and spiritual works of mercy. They shared their success and failure in doing so (Lubich 1969: 70–3). Under the threat of bombing, they pledged their lives for one another. The experience of living like this resulted not merely in a moral, but also in a mystical unity: 'Ours is a mysticism distinctly... of the new commandment, the mysticism of the Church, in which the Church is truly Church because she is *unity*, the mystical body, love, because in her circulates the Holy Spirit who makes her the spouse of Christ' (quoted Povilus 1992: 66).

Chiara's invocation of 'mysticism' in the passage I have just quoted does not merely echo ecclesial doctrine; it also alludes to what Armando Torno calls 'some very particular graces' given to her in the summer of 1949 (Torno 2012: 47), when she, with a few companions, withdrew to a mountain retreat at Tonadico. There, during an intense period of illumination, she foresaw the future development of the recently founded Movement and envisioned 'the kingdom of God among us, the Trinity dwelling in a single cell of the Mystical Body' (quoted Torno 2012: 47). There too Chiara and her closest followers sealed a pact with each other in the very heart of Jesus present in the eucharist: 'And so our daily communions were three: with Jesus in the Eucharist, with His Word, and the communion among us' (quoted Torno 2012: 49). Chiara's Trinitarian visions encompassed her view of the community: 'In the Fire of the Trinity we were actually so fused into one that I called our little community a "Soul." We were the "Soul"' (quoted Torno 2012: 49).

A writing of 1950 confirms the connection between Chiara's thought, the spirituality of the Focolare, and the ecclesiology of Pope Pius XII:

Today I read part of the *Mystici Corporis*, born from the heart of Christ's vicar on earth in 1943, the year in which the Lord enlightened the first Focolarine about our Ideal. And our Ideal... is nothing but a divine infusion so that the mystical body, the Church that is, might live her divine life to the full. The Focolarini were born for

this, that in the unity of two or more... they might bring Jesus among the faithful and make of the faithful, other Christs, living and healthy members of the mystical body.
(quoted Povilus 1992: 82)

In 1953 the theme of the Mystical Body was reinforced by Chiara's meeting with Paolo Hnilča, SJ, a long-time prisoner of the communists, who had fled to the West from Czechoslovakia after having been secretly consecrated a bishop there in 1951. Hnilča urged the intense living of the mystery of the Mystical Body as a remedy for Communism—an exhortation that the Focolare Movement took seriously, sending members behind the Iron Curtain to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and East Germany (Torno 2012: 55–9, 63–4, 66–7, 74–5). In 1956, as a support for the *Mystici Corporis* Institute for East Soviet Studies at the Vatican's State Secretariat, the Focolare launched its Priests and Religious League (Torno 2012: 56).

In 1958, when the Focolare Movement itself was under scrutiny by the Holy See (Torno 2012: 87–94; Gallagher 1997: 78–89; Lubich 1992: 60–2), the *Mystici Corporis* Institute was suspended (Torno 2012: 61). Later, in 1964, when Loppiano, located not far from Florence, was founded as the first of over thirty Focolare 'little towns' worldwide (Robertson 1978: 44–51), the inhabitants took courses there in a school of formation titled the *Mystici Corporis* Instituto. According to Donald Mitchell, 'Chiara wrote often about the encyclical on the Mystical Body,' which resonated with 'her mystical experience of the Church and the role of the Focolare in the Church,' and the courses offered at the *Mystici Corporis* Instituto were 'directed to that vision' and its realization (quoted personal email correspondence, 23 June 2016).

Although the encyclical of Pius XII controversially identifies the Mystical Body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church (Dulles 1989: 423), Focolare members read the encyclical itself and the prayer of Jesus 'that they may all be one' (John 17: 21, quoted in the encyclical in par. 102) as an incentive to ecumenical dialogue. Responding to an invitation from the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt, Germany, in 1962, Chiara began her work there with Lutheran pastors who had been formed by their memberships in the Brotherhood of the Common Life and the Brotherhood of the Cross (Torno 2012: 66–7). This first meeting led to the establishment of the Focolare's Centro Uno in Rome for ecumenical work and of a 'Centre for Ecumenical Life' at Ottmaring, near Augsburg, Bavaria, in 1968, where Catholic and Lutheran families live together, sharing daily evening prayer. 'Convinced that God will bring about unity in His way,' the participants simply 'create an atmosphere of love and mutual respect, live by the "Word of Life" which both traditions have in common, and let Christ be formed in their midst,' explains Edwin Robertson (1978: 37).

As Robertson emphasizes, the 'Focolare Movement came into contact with Lutheranism at its most promising point,' that is, representatives of the 'brotherhood movements' in Germany, whose interest in community life and ecumenism had been fostered by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's experiment in a clandestine seminary for the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde (shut down by the Gestapo in 1937) and by his celebrated book, *Life Together* (Robertson 1978: 35). 'An exposition of life in community

drawing on the whole Finkenwalde experience and its theological basis' (Clements 2015: 164), *Life Together* describes a daily regimen of corporate prayer, silent meditation on scripture, table fellowship, and virtuous practice (for example, holding one's tongue, meekness, listening, helpfulness, bearing with each other, exercising authority). In his practice at Finkenwalde (and earlier at Zingst), Bonhoeffer drew inspiration from his experiences in England at Anglo-Catholic seminaries and religious houses, but also from spiritual practices of the Moravian Brethren, whose daily biblical 'Watchwords' are akin to the 'Word of Life' among the Focolare (Clements 2015: 163).

As Keith Clements argues, Bonhoeffer's increasing commitment to ecumenism is intrinsically connected to developments in his ecclesiology, which gained its first articulation in his youthful dissertation, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (1927). Already there he asserts the real unity of all Christians in the one Body of Christ: 'The Body of Christ is Rome and Corinth, Wittenberg, Geneva, and Stockholm, and the members of all the individual churches all belong to the totality as the *sanctorum communio*' (Bonhoeffer 1963: 154). In *Life Together*, he insists, 'Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ... We belong to Him because we are in Him. That is why the Scriptures call us the Body of Christ' (Bonhoeffer 1954: 21, 24). Bonhoeffer seems not to have read Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*, which was published shortly after Bonhoeffer's imprisonment at Tegel on 5 April 1943, and he would surely have disagreed with aspects of its ecclesiology; one suspects, however, that he would also have been heartened by its affirmation of Christ's mysterious presence in the members of his Body, suffering in the world (cf. Bonhoeffer 1971: 361), and by its call for unity in Christ, voiced by the pope in the quoted prayer of Jesus (par. 102): 'that they all may be one' (John 17: 21).

The Focolare's ecumenical dialogue (which has expanded to include Orthodox Christians, as well as Protestants from over 200 churches) is one of four dialogues in which focolarini are engaged: (1) in the Roman Catholic world; (2) in the wider Christian world; (3) in the world of other religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the indigenous religions of Africa, etc.); and (4) in the secular world, with atheists (see Lubich 1992: 110–11). The charism and mission of unity extends, in Chiara's vision, to all humanity, because the Son of God emptied himself in order to make himself one with humankind, assuming a human nature, a human soul, a human body, and taking our guilt upon himself (cf. Phil. 2: 5–8). By virtue of the incarnation, Chiara suggests, the Mystical Body of Christ, visible in the Church, includes all humanity and incorporates the whole of creation (Lubich 2002: 30–7).

The sure ground for unity with God and others is the mystery of Christ's self-emptying out of love, which went to the point of suffering God's abandonment of him, without ceasing to love. 'Jesus forsaken took upon himself and experienced personally the non-being of creatures separated from the source of being,' writes Chiara. 'He took upon himself the "vanity of vanities" (Qo. 1:2)' (Lubich 2002: 35). Christ's love took him even to hell, the underworld of a totalized disunity, and triumphed over it (see Blaumeiser 2002: 72–88). In Chiara's Christology, then, the soul's Calvary experience of 'Jesus

Forsaken' (both in the self and in the other) paradoxically guarantees the Easter presence of 'Jesus in the Midst', who is the sought-for Unity.

As Chiara relates, she had her first encounter with Jesus Forsaken on 24 January 1944, in the very first month of the Focolare's existence. A priest expressed to Chiara his opinion that the moment of Christ's greatest suffering came at his cry from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27: 46; Ps. 22: 1). At the priest's departure, Chiara told her companion, Dori Zamboni, 'If Jesus' great pain was His abandonment by His Father, we will choose Him as our Ideal and that is the way we will follow Him' (Lubich 1985: 45–6). Jesus Forsaken began to be addressed in the daily prayers of the focolarini, and He became the focus of their contemplation: 'Jesus Forsaken was the only book we took to read' (Lubich 1985: 47, 51). By 1948 Chiara understood better the inner connection between Jesus Forsaken and unity. 'In my experience,' she wrote to a young religious, 'only the Love-Pain as powerful as that of Jesus Forsaken can keep a soul on its feet when he finds himself on the front lines in the cause of unity' (Lubich 1985: 55). Another letter from 1948 describes 'Unity and Jesus Forsaken' as 'two faces of the same medal' (Lubich 1985: 58). The general statutes of the Focolare—otherwise known as the Opera di Maria (Work of Mary)—affirm: 'In his forsakenness, Jesus is the teacher of unity, of divine unity' (Lubich 2001: 31).

CHRIST'S MYSTICAL BODY AND THE BODY OF THE DEVIL: SIMONE WEIL AND RENÉ GIRARD

Lubich's description of 'Jesus Forsaken' as an invincible bond of unity uncannily recalls Simone Weil's teaching on the Trinitarian implications of Christ's cry from the cross, juxtaposing that doctrine of triune love against an understanding of affliction itself as a socially mediated form of suffering. In an important essay, 'The Love of God and Affliction', published after her death on 24 August 1943, she writes: 'The love between God [the Father] and God [the Son], which itself is God [the Spirit], is this bond of double virtue: the bond that unites two beings so closely that they are indistinguishable and really form a single unity and the bond that stretches across distance and triumphs over infinite separation. The unity of God, wherein all plurality disappears, and the abandonment, wherein Christ believes he is left while never ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms of the same Love, the Love that is God himself' (Weil 1973: 126–7).

As Weil understands, in part because of her own experience of dehumanizing factory work and debilitating headaches, 'Men struck down by affliction are at the foot of the Cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God' (Weil 1973: 124). There the soul cries out, 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Weil 1973: 89). Affliction, for Weil, designates an extreme form of suffering that 'means physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation, all at the same time' (Weil 1973: 134). She describes such affliction as a

piercing nail, affixing the soul's attention and enabling its mystical union through grace with Christ and Christ's immense power of love. Affliction can also, however, 'kill the souls' of those unprepared for it (Weil 1973: 121), who experience the force of its 'gravity' without a corresponding 'grace' (see Weil 2002: 1–4).

Whereas Lubich and the focolarini heard Jesus Forsaken raising 'His cry of abandonment from His Mystical Body' (Lubich 1985: 64), Weil resisted the use of that language to describe Christ's presence-in-abandonment in the afflicted. Writing to her spiritual director, Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, OP, about her hesitations to accept baptism, she first calls the 'image of the Mystical Body of Christ... very attractive' (Weil 1973: 80). (She probably heard it used in the ranks of the Catholic Action organization for young workers, the JOC (*Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*), which she praises in *The Need for Roots* as 'perhaps the only sure sign that Christianity is not dead in us': Weil 2002: 63.) She goes on, however, to criticize the image, then popular in worker circles, on two grounds: (1) its insufficiency in honouring the individual person in whom the whole Christ lives 'in his integrity and in his indivisible unity', and (2) its disturbing similitude to 'a great many other mystical bodies, which have not Christ for their head' (Weil 1973: 81). An acknowledged Christian mystic and a social activist, Weil famously took her stance at 'the threshold of the Church', renouncing 'the joy of membership in the Mystical Body of Christ', while remaining 'faithful to Christ unto death' (Weil 1973: 76, 81).

Mystici Corporis, published in the year of Weil's death, speaks directly to some of these objections, while Vatican Council II's *Nostra Aetate* ('Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions') answers to other concerns of hers (see Nava 2001: 9 and Hebblethwaite 1979: 2). What I want to emphasize here is the lasting value of Weil's discerning descriptions of 'mystical bodies, which have not Christ for their head' (Weil 1973: 81) as an apophatic contribution to ecclesiology. Weil clearly distinguished the Church in her purity from such demonic mystical bodies, but she (like her contemporaries, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Edith Stein) also seriously engaged the sociologists of religion in order to understand better the 'mixed' (*permixta*) reality of the wayfaring Church on earth, the dual citizenship (earthly and heavenly) of its members, and the Christian's call to an anti-idolatrous witness in the world.

Calling for a 'science of society', she warns: 'The mass of people is a very active, huge beast which reacts quite instinctively and has become completely conditioned... The Great Beast possesses a very powerful collective imagination, but no understanding' (Weil 1978: 218). For Weil, Karl Marx (1818–83) and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) offered the most important sociological analyses, which she creatively synthesized with Platonic philosophy and Christian mysticism. From Marx and Durkheim she learned that the will-to-power in social, political, and economic relationships holds 'Master' and 'Slave' alike captive to an idolatrous force of oppression (Weil 1986: 145). Weil's notebooks of 1940–2 include the following stark, double equation: 'The Devil is the collective. [Which in Durkheim is the divinity.]' (Weil 1970: 304). Contesting both Marx's materialism and Durkheim's notion of an absolute social transcendence, however, Weil insists, 'It is only by entering the transcendental, the supernatural, the authentically spiritual order that

man rises above the social. Until then, whatever he may do, the social is transcendent in relation to him' (Weil 2002: 166).

Weil's thought vividly portrays the Great Beast of Plato's *Republic* as a false God, a 'social Beast' with many members (Weil 2002: 168). In her writings, she sometimes closely identifies this Great Beast with the empirical Church (for example, in its functional alliance with emperors and kings), and thus with an *ersatz* Mystical Body of Christ (Weil 2002: 166). But Weil also clearly acknowledges as 'indispensable' the 'function of the Church as the collective keeper of dogma' (Weil 1973: 81). She draws inspiration from the Catholic Action of the JOC. She regards the Church as a graced society, a privileged *metaxu* or bridge to God, a 'region of good and evil', of 'mixed blessings... which warm and nourish the soul' (Weil 2002: 147). 'The architecture of the church itself, the images which fill it, the words of the liturgy and prayer, the ritual gestures of the priest are all intermediaries', she writes, by which people are 'guided towards God', opened to grace, and thus enabled to rise above the merely social (Weil 1986: 249). In the 'convention' of the eucharist itself—located 'at the very center' of the Church's art, beauty, teaching, and charitable practice—she recognizes an 'absolute purity', the true 'Lamb of God which takes away sin', the 'scapegoat' for the world's evil (Weil 1973: 187–9).

Reading Weil in the 1950s, her younger French compatriot René Girard was struck by her acute awareness of mimetic propensities in herself and others, of social mechanisms of oppression, and of the afflicted as Christ-like scapegoats (Girard et al. 2007: 150; Girard and Rose 2011: 26). Then in the process of his own religious conversion accompanied by 'quasi-mystical' experiences of illumination (Girard 1996: 285), Girard, like Weil before him, increasingly employed the social sciences (especially cultural anthropology, but also a Durkheimian sociology) to develop his mimetic theory, even as he tested their findings against a philosophical and theological horizon.

Building upon Weil's identification of the Great Beast with the Devil, Girard revived the patristic notion of 'the Body of the Devil' (found in the seven Rules of Tyconius, as they are preserved in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* 3.30.42–37.56; Robertson 1958: 104–17) to name the sacrificial collective (see Girard et al. 2007: 181–82; Girard 2001: 149–53, 95–100; Kirwan 2009: 87–8), the mob of lynchers, whose members are blind to their scapegoating of another person or group. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard asserts: 'Satan is the name for the mimetic process as a whole; that is why he is the source not merely of rivalry and disorder but of all the forms of lying order inside which humanity lives... Satan's order has no origin other than murder' (Girard 1987: 162). Similarly, in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, Girard summarizes: 'The DEVIL, or SATAN, signifies rivalistic contagion, up to and including the single victim mechanism' (Girard 2001: 43).

The rule spoken by Caiaphas—'It is expedient that one man should die for the people' (John 18: 14; 11: 49–50)—is, for Girard, 'the definitive revelation of sacrifice and its origin', given prophetically in the scriptures, 'without either the speaker or the listeners being aware' of its full anthropological and social import (Girard 1986: 114). The *meconnaissance* ('misrecognition') of mimetic rivalry and of scapegoating, which Girard names an effect of the original sin (Girard 2010: 120; 2001: 150; see Alison 1998; Schwager 2006),

the founding murder, corresponds to Weil's idea that the members of the Beast lack understanding of the collective processes in which they participate. 'Social phenomena are outside the grasp of the human intelligence', writes Weil, because 'the human mind is...incapable of seizing upon this whole of which it is a part' (Weil 1956: i. 132). 'This mystery [of blindness]', she adds, 'creates an apparent relationship between the social and the supernatural and excuses Durkheim up to a certain point' (Weil 1956: i. 132).

Like Weil, Girard sees grace, 'a power superior to violent contagion' (Girard 2001: 189), as the only means of unblinding for the individual: 'The Spirit enlightens persecutors concerning their acts of persecution', disclosing 'to individuals the literal truth of what Jesus said during his crucifixion: "They don't know what they are doing" [Luke 20: 34]' (Girard 2001: 190). The grace of knowing was given to the 'protesting minority' who stood at the cross and to 'the little group of Jesus' last faithful followers', who had deserted him at his arrest, but who came 'to recognize what they had not recognized before and to reproach themselves for their pathetic flight', when they had been 'more than half-possessed by the violent contagion against Jesus' (Girard 2001: 188). 'Grace', writes Wolfgang Palaver, 'is the boundary of Girard's anthropological apologetics, in particular when he demonstrates that it is essential for overcoming the scapegoat mechanism' (Palaver 2013: 229). Girard frequently cites the examples of Peter, who wept at the glance of Jesus for having denied him (Luke 22: 61–2), and of Paul, who heard Christ's question on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 4). Grace was given, in short, to the apostles and evangelists at the wellspring of the Church as a grace of compunction, unblinding, and conversion.

Theoretically distinct in Girard's vision, the Mystical Body of Christ proclaims the innocence of the Victim and lives in membership with those who are outcast and persecuted, comforting them through the power of the Paraclete, whereas the Body of Satan appears as a group of accusers, imitating the Accuser (Rev. 12: 10). The propensity towards *meconnaissance*, however, remains in the members of the wayfaring Church, who live in a world that strives to keep them ensnared by worldly desires and fears, and who depend continually on Christ's grace. In Girard's analysis, as in Augustine's explanation of the seventh rule of Tyconius, the Church *in via* ('on the way') thus remains a mixture (*permixta*) of saints and sinners, of wheat and tares (cf. Matt. 13: 24–30), of Christ and Antichrist, just as the embattled soul of the individual disciple experiences both sight and blindness, virtue and vice, death and life. Pius XII makes this same point in *Mystici Corporis* (see par. 23).

Writing about the history of the papacy in chapter 9 of *Battling to the End*, Girard chronicles the Church's centuries-old struggle to free that office from its own mimetic tendencies in rivalry with emperors and kings, the 'powers and the principalities' (Eph. 6: 12) of this world. In Girard's view, the papacies of John Paul II and of Benedict XVI demonstrate the freedom of a servant-leader of the Church to be unlike the leaders of this world, uncompromised by temporal power, repentant for sins (his own and others), free of resentment, lacking in military force, and transcendent over the interests of nationalist politics. To the extent that the pope has emerged in modernity as a 'universal singularity' (Girard 2010: 197), a uniting centre in Christ for the pilgrim Church, he encapsulates how the eucharistic logic of the Church counters the all-against-one of the Body of the Devil.

THE MYSTICAL BODY AT WORK IN WARTIME: DOROTHY DAY AND JOSEPH KENTENICH

As William Cavanaugh has emphasized, Pope Pius XII sought in *Mystici Corporis* to remind Christians who were fighting each other during the Second World War of their common membership in Christ's Mystical Body and thus to engage them for the cause of peace (Cavanaugh 2001: 457–9). The pope presents the Church in her unity as an icon for its readers' contemplation: 'While before their eyes nation rises up against nation, . . . if they turn their gaze to the Church, if they contemplate her divinely-given unity—by which all men of every race are united to Christ in the bond of brotherhood—they will be forced to admire this fellowship in charity, and . . . will long to share in the same union and charity' (par. 5). The papal office, in particular, is seen in the encyclical as a uniting point transcendent to political division: 'Catholics the world over, though their countries may have drawn the sword against each other, look to the Vicar of Jesus Christ as to the loving Father of them all' (par. 6).

Pius XII tried 'desperately, and almost completely unsuccessfully, to broker peace among the warring nation-states through diplomatic channels, offering the Church to serve as an impartial forum above the political fray' (Cavanaugh 2001: 460). The pope 'did not, however, seriously call into question the political loyalty of the individual Christian to the nation-state, that being beyond the scope of the Church's spiritual authority' (Cavanaugh 2001: 460). Conceiving of that authority as restricted to a spiritual or moral plane, the pontiff granted autonomy to the political order governed by the modern state (an autonomy the state also vigorously claimed for itself), leaving open the theoretical possibility (or so it seemed to some) 'of being a good Catholic and a good Nazi at the same time' (Cavanaugh 2001: 460).

Dorothy Day, co-founder with Peter Maurin in 1933 of the Catholic Worker Movement, and Father Joseph Kentenich, founder in 1914 of the Schoenstatt Work, drew vastly different conclusions from the pope's teaching, however. They interpreted the encyclical of Pius XII precisely as an incentive for persons and communities to challenge the limit of the state's power and to give first place in practical life to the duties of membership in the Mystical Body of Christ. For Day, this entailed voluntary poverty and conscientious objection to military service. For Father Kentenich, it meant political and spiritual opposition to Hitler's Reich and years of suffering as a political prisoner in the concentration camp at Dachau (1942–5). Both advocated on behalf of Jews and labourers (see Astell 2003; Werntz 2015). Both formed Christian communities where the doctrine of the Mystical Body has gained a lived expression.

Day and Maurin founded the Catholic Worker at the height of the Great Depression. Day describes its 'program of action' as 'the participation in the works of mercy as an immediate way of combatting the materialism of our industrial capitalist system, on the one hand, and the atheist materialism of communism, on the other' (Day 1955: 41). In Day's mind, a living membership in the Mystical Body expresses itself in the works of

mercy described in Matthew 25: 35–6: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ As Day recalls, the paper *The Catholic Worker*, which became a key vehicle for the Movement’s growth,

emphasized over and over the personal responsibility of every one of its readers to be live members of the Mystical Body of Christ. ‘You are all members, one of another, and where the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered,’ St. Paul wrote. And from this doctrine it followed that all the love expressed in action for God and our brother increased the sum total of love in the world to overcome the hatred and strife let loose in our time. (Day 1955: 41)

As Myles Werntz observes, Day’s understanding of the Church as Christ’s Mystical Body is anchored in her recognition of ‘the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, a human nature which is manifested in the corporate life of the Church’ (Werntz 2015: 2). In 1935 Day wrote:

It is because we forget the Humanity of Christ (present with us today in the Blessed Sacrament just as truly as when He walked with His apostles through the cornfields that Sunday long ago, breakfasting on the ears of corn)—that we have ignored the material claims of our fellow man during this capitalist, materialist era. We have allowed our brothers and sisters, our fellow members in the Mystical Body to be degraded, to endure slavery to a machine, to live in rat-infested holes.

(Day 1935; quoted Werntz 2015: 2)

This emphasis on Christ’s humanity, on his corporeal existence, explains Day’s ‘fluid’ employment of the term ‘Mystical Body’, which she uses sometimes in a broad sense, inclusive of every human being; sometimes in a narrower sense, restricted to the baptized. Indeed, she regularly couples these meanings in order to designate the ‘potential’ for each one’s spiritual ‘ennoblement’ in and through Christ’s grace (see Werntz 2015: n. 4).

For Day and Maurin, the eucharist as the sacrament of Christ’s Real Presence—in his body, blood, soul, and divinity—sustains the members of Christ’s Mystical Body in their works of mercy. Inspired by the liturgical theology of Virgil Michel, OSB (1890–1938), the Catholic Workers grasped a vital connection between the mass and the works of mercy performed by Christ’s members in the Mystical Body. Day told young Catholic Workers, ‘The Mass is the Work!’ and she instructed one such worker, Stanley Vishnewski, ‘that by missing [daily] Mass [he] was hurting the work’ (Day 1999: 36, 17). Relating the eucharist and the Mystical Body together in a vital union, as Day did, she effectively renewed the patristic understanding, studied by Henri de Lubac, of the Church as Christ’s ‘true body’ (*Corpus verum*), active and visible in the world. This same ‘true body’, however, is also “‘mystical,”” writes Cavanaugh, ‘in the sense that the work is accomplished not by human effort [alone], but by the grace of Christ whose Spirit works within us’ (Cavanaugh 1999: 463).

Strongly influenced by the philosophical writings of the famous Russian convert from communism, Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1949), who advocated the embrace of ‘an apophatic negative sociology’ (Berdyaev 1944: 18, 9; see Astell 2008), Day and Maurin practised an anarchic asceticism of communal withdrawal from the dominant industrial culture, its values, and its politics, on the one hand, and the building up of small Christian communities, ‘Houses of Hospitality’, on the other. Thirty-two such houses were established before the United States entered the Second World War, when the ranks of the Catholic Workers significantly dwindled, due to the military conscription of many and the anti-conscription stance taken by Day, who believed ‘modern war to be murder’ (Day 2008: 62).

The decision of Day to oppose the war and other forms of state-sanctioned violence (for example, capital punishment) is consistent, Cavanaugh and Werntz have argued, with her personal understanding and application of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. For this she would have found support in the pages of *Mystici Corporis*, where Christ’s members are seen to be tragically fighting, killing, and maiming each other. The pope teaches: ‘So vast is the love of the divine Spouse that it embraces in His Bride *the whole human race without exception* . . . True love of the Church, therefore, requires . . . that we should recognize in other men, though they are not yet joined to us in the body of the Church, our brothers in Christ *according to the flesh* . . . Our peaceful King . . . taught us to love not only those of another nation or race, *but even our enemies*’ (par. 96, emphasis added).

The division of the war also divided hearts. Day supported individual Catholic Workers in their various decisions, taken in good conscience, regarding military service. Some, like David Mason, refused induction; some found themselves in a ‘conscientious objector camp at Warner, New Hampshire, enduring the isolation and detachment of what is practically a concentration camp’; some accepted ‘non-combatant’ roles; some, like Steve Hergenhan and James McGovern, died in action (Day 2008: 66–7).

Similarly, in Germany, members of the Schoenstatt Movement took different stances regarding the war. Some served in the German army with mental reservation. Father Kentenich supported the decision of Franz Reinisch, SAC (1903–42), however, to refuse to take the loyalty oath to Hitler, whom Reinisch regarded as an Antichrist. For that refusal, Reinisch—like his Austrian compatriot Franz Jägerstätter (1907–43), after him—was beheaded in Berlin-Tegel on 21 August 1942. Like Reinisch, Father Kentenich spoke publicly against Hitler, preaching the incompatibility of Christianity and Nazism (see Monnerjahn 2001: 127–35, 151–9, 163), until he himself was arrested on 20 September 1941, and sent to Dachau as a political prisoner, where other Schoenstatters were also interned.

From Schoenstatt’s beginning on 18 October 1914, the Movement’s ‘constant objective was to overcome the collectivistic type of person inwardly’, teaching and living a ‘way of overcoming collectivism in people’ (Kentenich 2004: 141). Father Kentenich accepted what he called ‘mass-mindedness’ as an acute educational challenge for modern times and called for ‘a new sociological way of thinking’ that opposed both an exaggerated individualism, on the one hand, and a ‘crowd mentality,’ on the other (Kentenich

2004: 141, 303). He motivated others to strive to realize the ideal of 'the new person in the new community characterized by the universal apostolate' (Kentenich 2004: 27–67).

Given this educational emphasis, Father Kentenich turned with particular interest to the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. For him, membership in the Mystical Body was not simply a 'given' by virtue of baptism; rather, it entailed an entire programme of spiritual formation and personal development, in accord with a model of organic growth, function, and inter-relation. Proclaiming childlikeness before God as an alternative to the *Übermensch* ('Superman') of National Socialism, Father Kentenich declared in 1937: 'For us, childlikeness is the great aim of human growth... the total meaning of Christian education: that we be formed in the image of the God-man, the only-begotten Son... Here would be the place to insert the entire teaching on the Mystical Body of Christ' (Kentenich 2001: 50). In Father Kentenich's understanding, the goal of growth in childlikeness (recalling Matt. 18: 3: 'Unless you change and become like little children...') gives new meaning to faults, sins, and personal limitations, freeing the person to be able to accept failures and to triumph over them through humility and trust: 'We must become aware of being a member of the Mystical Body. Christ lives in me. He does it in me' (Kentenich 2004: 179).

Father Kentenich points to an intimate *unio quasi physica* (quasi-physical union) uniting the members of the Mystical Body to Christ and to one another in Christ: 'it is not merely moral, though it is not purely physical either' (Kentenich 2001: 55–6). Every human being must, then, be welcomed as a mother welcomes a child and in that child, Christ (cf. Luke 9: 48): 'to welcome someone' means 'I believe in the Mystical Body of Christ' (Kentenich 2001: 55). The *unio quasi physica* within the Mystical Body also affects relations between the sexes, strengthening reverence: 'We must *see each person as a child of God and member of Christ*' (Kentenich 2001: 239). At the level of spiritual union, moreover, each one's striving for holiness affects the other's well-being. (The founder's physical imprisonment in Dachau inspired a tremendous striving for 'the freedom of the children of God' (Rom. 8: 21) among his fellow Schoenstatters; see Monnerjahn 2001: 165–9.)

Importantly, membership in Christ's Mystical Body means a share in Christ's life, work, and sacrificial offering. 'You will recall', Father Kentenich tells his listeners, 'how St. Paul viewed the Mystical Body of Christ: I complete in my own sufferings what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1: 24)' (Kentenich 2001: 79). A stanza in the Schoenstatt Office for the hour of None echoes this same Pauline passage in *Heavenwards*, a collection of prayers Father Kentenich composed in Dachau: 'Through my life of sacrifice let me complete / ... / whatever fullness is lacking / in the cross and suffering of Christ' (Kentenich 1992: 53). Father Kentenich includes in his 1944 treatise *Marian Instrument Piety* a quotation from *Mystici Corporis* (par. 110) in which the pope uses this same verse from Colossians, applying it to Mary at Calvary, the Queen of Martyrs, and to all the martyrs (Kentenich 1992: 42).

Marian Instrument Piety features two extended quotations from *Mystici Corporis*: namely, paragraph 44 (concerning the Head's need of his members, of their work, sacrifices, and prayers) and paragraph 110 (concerning the Virgin Mother of God). The latter

praises Mary as ‘mother of our Head’ and thus ‘the mother of all His members’ (Kentenich 1992: 42, 145–6). The entire treatise arguably responds to the encyclical, however. Explaining six qualities of the instrument, Father Kentenich discusses especially the second quality, ‘Total Attachment (a) to the wish and will of God and (b) to God himself’, in terms that echo the doctrine of the Mystical Body: ‘We like to speak of the *instrument* that is *mystically united with God*; and in doing so, there comes to mind all that can be said about the *mystic union* that exists in the childhood of God and the membership with Christ’ (Kentenich 1992: 15).

In that same section of the text, Father Kentenich also alludes to the liturgical dimension, given such prominence by the Benedictine writers of his day: ‘By liturgy we mean the *holy and mysterious activity of Christ as Head of his Church, and also the holy and mysterious cooperation of his bride, the Church, in order to de-satanize the world, to transfigure it, and to glorify the Father*’ (Kentenich 1992: 11). ‘We make efforts not only to celebrate but to live the Mass’, he writes (Kentenich 1992: 12), and he interprets the Schoenstatt practice of making ‘contributions to the Capital of Grace’ as a liturgical act, done in ‘unity of purpose with God’: ‘The foundation for the capital of grace is the membership in the Mystical Body and the childhood of God. For only through member-like connection with Christ and childlike relationship with the Father can our works become beautiful’ (Kentenich 1992: 13). (Father Kentenich underscores this liturgical dimension in his ‘Mass of God’s Instruments’ and in his ‘Way of the Cross of God’s Instruments’, both composed in Dachau in 1944.)

Whereas Pius XII devotes only the last two paragraphs of *Mystici Corporis* to Mary, Father Kentenich presents Mary at length as the model and object of Schoenstatt’s instrument piety, which he calls a way of life and a source of knowledge (see Monnerjahn 2001: 189). Given her unique position as Christ’s Mother and his permanent helpmate in the work of salvation, the *unio quasi physica* uniting Head and member (and member with member) within the Mystical Body is so close in Mary’s case, he maintains, that devotion to Mary imparts a special knowledge of Christ, involving heart, mind, and will and integrating the personality. The lived Covenant of Love with Mary thus protects and nourishes the member’s baptismal Covenant with Christ and Christ’s members.

CONCLUSION

As this survey of selected readers, actual and intended, of the 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis* shows, the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ affords a multi-faceted approach to the mysticism of the social life: ecclesial, interreligious, anthropological, liturgical, economic, and political. The individual member of the Mystical Body is revealed to be an irreducibly social being, whose personal union with Christ entails dynamic intersubjective relationships with others, some of whom strive intensely for holiness, enjoying and increasing ‘the communion of the saints’, while others may remain still at a great distance from Christ, eliciting in the member Christ’s own love for the stranger, sinner,

and enemy. Whereas the member of the 'Great Beast', the 'Body of the Devil', is lost in the collective, becoming at best a replaceable part, the members of Christ's Mystical Body are joined to Christ, lost in Christ, in a way that enhances each one's personhood, while at the same time strengthening the community, both in its internal relations and in its power to welcome others. In the soul-life of such communities and in the Church as a whole, Christ 'takes form' (Gal. 4: 19).

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CHAPTER 32

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

MICHAEL BARNES

WHEN I was director of a diocesan agency for interreligious relations my work centred around what has now become familiar as the fourfold dialogue—theological exchange, religious experience, common action, and common life. The people who turned up for our meetings and ‘events’ could roughly be divided into three constituencies. The biggest was Christian, mainly Catholic, those caught up in the big theological shifts brought about by Vatican II and anxious to respond positively to its call to ‘encourage, preserve and promote’ the spiritual and social values found among other religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). Secondly, there were people from other faith communities, some drawn in by specific invitations to speak or lead a discussion, some in mixed-faith marriages and therefore already experiencing a strongly interreligious element in their personal lives, and others fascinated by what was happening in the lives of their Christian neighbours. The third group included those who were often on the fringes of their own communities, those with little or no religious hinterland, and those who considered themselves ‘inter-faith’, people reluctant to use any sort of institutional title. I termed them ‘meditators’ because one thing that held them together was an eclectic jumble of Asian meditation techniques.

All the chapters in this book are working to put mystical theology back at the heart of ecclesial life. This chapter also has the inner life of the Church as its major focus. At both pastoral and theological levels it would be easy just to ignore the meditators. Certainly, the more flaky fit the stereotype of the New Age searcher; if they have any sort of theology of religions it’s an untroubled pluralism. A good number, however, recognize that ‘the religions’ are not just to be homogenized by reducing the richness of cultural patterns to some convenient over-arching stereotype. In their awkward yet glorious dissonance they raise theological questions about truth and meaning that reverberate beyond any concern for immediate assurance. Later I shall be reflecting on the contemplative dimension of Comparative Theology, one of the most important theological developments to come out of the encounter of religions in recent years. Sufficient for the

moment to note that at its heart is the experience of learning about the ways of God that are often hidden yet disclosed in any encounter with the other—*wherever* that other is to be discerned. I am not arguing that the ‘spiritual but not religious’ types who find themselves attracted to Asian forms of meditation have some great prophetic role to play in the Church. My point is based on the conviction that, without the dialogue of religious experience, *any* theology of religions would quickly revert to a form of more or less sophisticated apologetics aimed at placing the other in a Christianity-centred scheme of things. The fourfold dialogue denotes an integrated pattern of Christian living which touches the Church at all levels of its existence and demands a sustained theological focus on the many transformative relationships, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, which mark the Christian Church in a globalized world.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE ‘CONTEMPLATIVE TURN’

What is to be learned from ‘meditators’ and their experience of life on the ragged borders between religions? First, what is often most impressive is a sense of wonder and a deep yet patient restlessness with which the classical mystics would have been familiar. Secondly, while many begin with the intention of gaining some sort of reassuring experiential ‘high’, what keeps them going is a persevering practice which reaches out from spiritual technologies to their grounding in ancient traditions of wisdom. Thirdly, if most normally privilege the dialogue of religious experience over theological exchange, they would also acknowledge that ‘common life’ and ‘common action’ add a significant ethical and even political dimension to their lives. They may not be skilled in theology or religious studies but it is noticeable how they often build up a sense of solidarity and friendship with people from my first two constituencies. In short, my third group is not to be dismissed as a feckless gaggle of self-absorbed obsessives. At least some recognize that what is needed to anchor themselves in a world that has long since lost any cultural coherence is a more *holistic* form of religious experience, one which, far from seeking to isolate some indubitable inner truth, recognizes the danger of separating grand ideas from the broader context of language, history, and culture where they make sense (Barnes 2013: 164ff.).

If it is true, as a certain interreligious wisdom has it, that the dialogue of religious experience is what mediates between the intellectual intensity of theological exchange and the ethically demanding engagements of common life and common action, then it follows that spirituality cannot be disregarded as the ‘soft’ side of dialogue, the genial sharing of meditation techniques and spiritual wisdom. On the contrary, what is at stake is a ‘contemplative turn’ in the theology of religions. Underlying the consumerist mentality that lumps T’ai Chi with Tarot cards and smoothes Rumi into the Kabbalah, lies

a cultural shift that focuses attention not just on questions of authenticity and intimacy but broader and more open-ended questions about the language of ultimate meaning in an intrinsically pluralist world.

In one way we have been here before. Thanks to Michel de Certeau we have become sensitive to the construction of 'mysticism' with its strong focus on an intense inwardness. The dislocation of the early modern period gave rise to a certain type of writing in which authority or legitimacy is given not by appeal to scripture or Church tradition but by a secret personal space which grants assurance to the fractured 'I'. "*Mystical*," says de Certeau, '*came to designate what had become separate from the institution*' (1992: 86). Ironically the now familiar language of 'mysticism' with its Jamesian reduction to some discrete self-authenticating inner experience has taken attention away from what is genuinely mysterious—that human beings go on encountering and responding to Holy Mystery. The language of *experience of God*, or at any rate its articulation in terms of extraordinary phenomena, becomes a sort of substitute language about God. Thus the very real theological problem of how language about God is to be used with integrity gets side-lined by a fixation on the place of encounter, the inner self, rather than the other to which experience mysteriously points. I do not doubt that many 'meditators' buy into some version of this. Just as they let the mystery of the unknowable God recede into the background, so they come to rely on *gurus* and *ācāryas*, lone spiritual virtuosi who seem very much at home in the foreground of their devotees' lives. And yet it would be a mistake to characterize the 'contemplative turn' in interreligious relations as irredeemably caught up with the construction of the spiritual self as a bulwark against a destructive modernity. The three groups I have introduced intermingle. They learn from each other, and in turn teach the Christian Church, and other faith communities, about the centrality of prayer and practice to a balanced account, not just of the spiritual life but of the place of all that is 'other' in the growth of faith and understanding.

As other chapters in this book have demonstrated, the sundering of theology from its life-giving roots in spiritual practice is a major issue not just for the well-being of the Church but for the role of theology within the academy. It is possible, however, to overstate the problem. It is not a feature of the Asian Church, nor of Christian communities in 'the West' who are more and more exposed to everyday encounter with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. What most impresses, especially in popular interreligious practices like shared pilgrimages and visits to places of worship, is the impalpable spiritual truth and beauty that is often encountered. Shared projects, especially in the wake of outbreaks of religiously inspired violence, generate their own interreligious sensibility, and awareness of the needs of the neighbour. None of this is particularly new. Instead it reminds us of something else that de Certeau recognized, namely that 'the other' is never to be tied down to some controlling category of experience but is constantly returning to 'haunt' the present. It has the feel of a sort of 'heterological law': if otherness is constrained it will simply come back in another form to 'haunt' the present (de Certeau 1986: 3).

This 'contemplative turn'—or more exactly *return*—with its focus on an otherness inextricably bound up with 'common life' and 'common action' in the everyday can be

traced back to the beginnings of the post-modern phase and the end of a programmatic account of religions and religious experience. Zaehner's later writing, with its threefold typology of nature, monistic, and theistic mysticisms, reads at times like a dyspeptic form of Comparative Theology as it hops with enormous bravado from one piece of religious philosophy to another (Zaehner 1970: 40ff.). However, the very assurance of Zaehner's objections to any sort of *philosophia perennis* seems decidedly dated. Today's 'meditators' may share something of the New Age obsession with interiority that fascinated Zaehner but they are also taken up with a humbler assessment of the religions as communities of *persons*—which Zaehner never considered significant. If today the more thoughtful ones perform a mediating role in interreligious relations, their generosity of purpose acts as a reminder that dialogue is always open-ended, as conversation between persons is never finished and always repeated; resolution and reconciliation are postponed in favour of a deeper learning about what Levinas talks about as the trace of Infinity revealed in the face of the other. In these terms, the contemporary cultural shift, often unhelpfully caricatured in terms of a dichotomy between 'religion' and 'spirituality', is better understood as a search for a re-enchantment of a fragmented post-modernity that is shared both by those on the fringes of the great religions and by those who seek to maintain an integrity of belief and practice that responds generously to analogous moves within other religious traditions.

Whatever interreligious perspectives this chapter adds to this book are not intended to reinstate some discrete essence of mysticism from the flux of more broadly conceived religious or indeed interreligious experience. Nor do they follow Zaehner in tracing a genealogy of styles and forms of mystical experience across a spectrum of traditions. Instead I focus on the work of comparison and dialogue as the locus within which a theology of religions that puts spirituality at the centre can be conceived. Using the notion of reflection or resonance, that sometimes uncanny experience of sameness-in-difference that finds itself echoed through textual traditions and in the lives of persons of faith, my aim is to foreground a contemplative attention to what is given in the otherness of all manner of relations into which human beings find themselves drawn. As noted, the dialogue of religious experience mediates between the everyday experience of neighbours and the more focused theological reflection that life in a pluralist post-modern world demands. Yet there is more to 'the mystical' than some felt experience of transcendence and more to 'dialogue' than a method of absorbing or responding to otherness. This chapter brings those two terms together by shifting attention away from the 'placing' of a problematic other in relation to a Christianity-centred view of things and towards a more pastorally oriented process of endless learning about the movements of God's Spirit. What I argue is that, just as a mystical theology is dedicated to pondering the paradox that the Word is spoken yet remains beyond speech, so in a theology that takes its rise from the multiform experience of dialogue across the religions what most demands attention is the trace of transcendence that often emerges from the experience of being called by the religious other. To put it the other way round, I take dialogue itself as the primary category to interpret the 'contemplative turn', a cultural shift that is bound up with, but is much wider than, the various practical forms taken by

dialogue itself. I shall come back to that point in the final part when I turn to a brief 'case-study' in Comparative Theology. Meanwhile it is important to say more about the practice of dialogue itself. When the Word is encountered in interpersonal relations it takes on a compelling form, especially when mediated by inspired and articulate mystic-teachers.

INTERRELIGIOUS MYSTICS AND THE TEACHING OF CONTEMPLATIVE WISDOM

Dialogue is nothing if not an interpersonal experience of the mediation of grace. Somewhere between the norm of faith and its faithful practice stand those who not only witness to an encounter with the other but act as guides to others on the way. I take just two of the more familiar names: Thomas Merton and Henri le Saux, or Swami Abhishiktananda, to give him the name he adopted in India. I introduce them not because they set some pattern of religious practice for other 'meditators' and interreligious contemplatives to follow but because they encapsulate a certain *docta ignorantia* about how to live a life of encounter with the other. In Merton's case that experience was mediated through an overwhelming sense of communion with the Buddha when he visited the great statues at Polonnaruwa in the north of Śri Lanka shortly before his tragic death in 1968. For Abhishiktananda it was more personal and rather more threatening to his sense of self: the encounter with Ramana Maharshi, one of the best known of Hindu *sannyāsis*. At first Ramana seemed all too ordinary but, as his spiritual diaries reveal, the French Benedictine monk came to recognize in him a holiness that he had never sensed outside Christianity (Abhishiktananda 1998: 7–10, 76ff.). Whether we describe such moments as conversion, communion, or enlightenment, they are part of the lexicon of mystical experience that is found in some form in all religions. But that is not to interpret them in semi-psychological terms as the voice of some indubitable inner authenticity. Both Merton and Abhishiktananda in different ways speak of the 'true self' in terms of a more complex encounter with the divine other.

Merton spent most of his life at the Cistercian abbey of Gethsemani, and to that extent he is an unlikely patron for interreligious relations. Yet he managed to combine the traditional routine of the monastic hours with the life of a hermit which gave him freedom to study. His writings on Sufi mysticism and Zen meditation, inspired by his contact with the likes of Louis Massignon and D. T. Suzuki, are remarkable testaments to his insatiable curiosity and lively intelligence. Abhishiktananda is much more obviously an icon for the dialogue of religious experience. He came from a similar monastic background to Merton yet as a young man hankered for the contemplative life in far distant India (du Boulay 2005: 39ff.). Long before the Second Vatican Council made dialogue a commonplace, he set up the Śāntivanam ashram in Tamil Nadu with the austere and

more academically inclined French diocesan priest, Jules Monchanin. Any romantic dreams he may have entertained about mystic India were quickly put under strain by a relationship that was never easy. Nor was the role of the ashram's resident *ācārya* one that inspired him. Rather like Merton, he found a way into a more solitary existence that suited his temperament. In his case it was to live as a traditional Hindu *sannyāsi* who rejects the world and wanders in search of *moksa*, ultimate release from the round of rebirth. With Merton that defining interreligious experience came at the end of his life. With Abhishiktananda it was at the beginning of his time in India, a pivotal shift that drove him into a life of earnest pursuit of that elusive meeting point between his Christian Trinitarian faith and the non-duality of the Vedanta. What continues to make them so influential is undoubtedly the record of their lives, as preserved in their writing and correspondence, but like so many other contemplatives and mystics, their defining moments of clarity are inseparable from a lengthy personal routine of asceticism, study, and inner pondering that is rooted in the liturgical tradition of the Church.

Merton and Abhishiktananda add a particular voice to a work of witness, one which resonates with the normative tradition but presses its limits—sometimes, as in Abhishiktananda's case, almost to breaking point. With Merton the pattern is more measured—or, at any rate, is given an assured and well-honed precision by the undoubted elegance of his prose. A master of his craft, he manages to keep the integrity of his own voice while yet entering into the idiom of his dialogue-partners, often correspondents from other faiths. Yet this is no mere artifice. Perhaps more than any spiritual writer on interreligious dialogue he succeeds in *communicating* across boundaries. Merton's instinct, that the life of the contemplative in any religious tradition is based on the conviction that he or she is confronted by the fullness of truth, is no vapid universalism. Paradoxically, in being grasped and responding to the empowering experience of the Word that is beyond words, speech becomes possible, a halting speech no doubt, but one that for the Christian contemplative is demanded by the Word that is addressed to all manner of people and in all manner of idioms. In that sense Merton is as much prophet as mystic, obedient to the Word that is not his own but other, yet skilled to speak of it in new ways. That uncanny and risky fusion of idioms is nowhere more apparent than in his description of the famous Polonnaruwa episode where he talks about being almost forcibly jerked free from his 'habitual, half-tied vision of things' yet also realizing that 'there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery."'

The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination...

This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything: it needs nothing. And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered...

The whole thing is very much a Zen garden, a span of bareness and openness and evidence, and the great figures, motionless, yet with the lines in full movement, waves of vesture and bodily form, a beautiful and holy vision. (Merton 1974: 233–6)

Before offering a brief comment on Merton's Buddhist idiom, particularly the fusion of the two great Buddhist concepts of emptiness and compassion, let me stay a little longer with Abhishiktananda. There is little of Merton's eloquence here. His is a more tortured voice, never sure which side of the Christian–Hindu border he is on and never confident of transcending difference in any single moment, let alone expressing that experience in words. Abhishiktananda sought to come to terms with a world soaked in the thought-forms and iconography of one of the most intriguing yet baffling of religious traditions. It acted like a magnet, drawing him inexorably out of his familiar world, convincing him that he was to be the 'Christian fulfilment' of Ramana Maharshi's spirit (Abhishiktananda 1998: 80). The dilemma, as he saw it, was how much to take with him and how much to appropriate: the tension faced by all who would seek to 'inculturate' or express their faith in another cultural form. In many ways his tragedy was that he never came to terms with the practical demands of the dilemma. How to remain rooted in the tradition of the Church while participating in the practices of advaitic Hinduism? Like his successor as *ācārya* at Śāntivanam, the urbane and assured Bede Griffiths, his was very much an interpersonal journey, shared with Christian theologians and Hindu *swāmis*, fellow wandering ascetics. But whereas Bede was as comfortable with Hindu devotional *bhakti* as he was with the major canonical texts or *śruti*, Abhishiktananda was fixated on the bare terms of Upanisadic non-dualism in all its philosophical remoteness. Not all his writing manages to achieve the bare simplicity of his most accessible book, a series of brief if idealistic exhortations called simply *Prayer*—though even here he is dominated by the call of an elusive transcendence.

The real *yogi* is one who has recovered his essential freedom, above all with regard to his own inner world of thoughts and desires. Nothing in him henceforth limits his responsiveness to the Spirit. Nothing hinders the growth in him of that inner force, the same force which holds the whole universe together and guides its development, that force which the ancient sages of India called *shakti*, and in which Christians can hardly refuse to recognize at least some adumbration of the Holy Spirit. (1967: 44)

Abhishiktananda is convinced that the future of the Indian Christian Church depends on a witness to the possibility of transcendence, a Christian *moksa* that can never be expressed in words. This is the goal of a contemplative life modelled on the role played by the Hindu *guru* or *jñāni*, a spiritual teacher who 'knows' through his own experience of God. Not surprisingly his efforts to achieve such a radical inculturation of Christianity turn out to be doubtfully consistent. His best-known work, *Saccidānanda*, begins by stating that the biblical 'mystery of darkness and silence which Jesus has revealed to us as the bosom of the Father' and the upanishadic symbolism of the 'untouched, undivided Brahman' discovered in the 'cave of the heart' are set together as 'the very same mystery'. Yet in the final pages he admits that the Christian's certainty of faith and the Hindu *jñāni*'s intuition into the nature of Brahman are 'quite different' (Abhishiktananda 1974: 12, 198). There is very little here of Merton's wonder at the sheer miraculous ordinariness of things. Merton, of course, understood the intellectual and spiritual coherence of

Zen and Sufi traditions without feeling the need to make them a substantive part of his contemplative practice, while for Abhishiktananda the yogic practices that most typified the religiosity of his adopted homeland are bound up with the life he felt called to lead. However, what holds these two giants of the contemplative path together is less the metaphysical vision that inspires their respective spiritual dialogue partners than the conviction that any such vision is inseparable from a contemplative waiting on the Spirit of God which entails an immersion in the ascetical and contemplative practice of those traditions. As William Harmless notes, the image of Merton the 'watchman' seems apposite for someone whose practice of faith, though shot through with all sorts of interreligious wisdom, made him always on the look-out for traces of God's loving presence (Harmless 2008: 37ff.). This takes us back to the 'meditators' and their dialogue of religious experience, raising an important pastoral and theological question about the place of the techniques or practices of another tradition in the Christian contemplative life.

While many Christians have been suspicious of regulated forms of prayer that appear to compromise the free movement of God's grace, a whole tradition of spiritual exercises, from Cassian and Climacus to the classic form of Ignatius of Loyola, has provided people with a structured response to that central imperative of the Gospel, the Johannine 'come and see'. Abhishiktananda's 'real yogi' is an ascetic who has transcended culture-specific boundaries and teaches a generic method for overcoming distractions by centring of the mind on one point. *Ekagrata* or 'one-pointedness' of concentration constitutes the combined aim of all yogic practices, from ethical and regulated lifestyle to structured posture and forms of breath-control. As it is put in the opening words of the classical *Yogasutra*, the purpose is the 'stilling of the modifications of the mind'. In so far as a set of largely ethical and physical exercises serves as a preparation for engaging with the Word of God and thus entering into a deeper contemplation, the conviction of teachers like Abhishiktananda is that they may be positively beneficial. With careful discernment, they can open up a 'space' to wait upon that encounter with the God whose Spirit is always waiting on human beings. There is, however, more at stake here than the uncontroversial point that contemplative prayer demands attention to the present moment. Much depends on the nature of the 'single point', what focus is used for concentrating the attention, what affective as well as cognitive associations it carries, and also on the manner of concentration, how the meditator relates to the central focus. The cultural context in which Abhishiktananda was seeking to build a contemplative way that was authentically Christian as well as authentically Indian was pervaded by upanisadic *advaita*. This radical 'non-dualism' that relativizes all ideas and concepts could only make sense in Christian terms as an apophatic theology. To that extent he was convinced that he was following one of the great traditions of Christian mysticism, that associated with the Pseudo-Dionysius and a line that extends from Gregory of Nyssa to John of the Cross. In the yogic practice of breath-control, the meditator is drawn into the breathing pattern, developing a mood of inner relaxation, a gradual withdrawal from all sensory phenomena. But this is less Gregory's *epectasis*, a 'reaching out', than a moving within. All feelings and thoughts are absorbed into the 'centre'. Abhishiktananda was well aware that this form of yogic 'one-pointedness' can risk descending into mere *self*-consciousness,

a sense of monistic isolation. That was how his central dilemma presented itself in contemplative terms.

Advaita Vedanta was not the religious world with which Merton became so familiar. A different form of meditation or manner of concentration is exhibited by the Buddhist tradition of yogic practice known as mindfulness. This has become such a familiar term, both in the 'meditator' world and beyond in clinical therapies of various kinds, that it has become necessary to reclaim its original Buddhist roots. It belongs, of course, in that element of the Noble Eightfold Path called *samma sati*—or *smṛti* in Sanskrit. The word has connotations of remembrance and calling to mind, but the practice of *satipatthana* or the 'setting up of mindfulness' is more exactly concerned with seeing all things in and from the present moment. Strictly speaking, 'right mindfulness' is all that is necessary for enlightenment. In practice, to make mindfulness *right*, the other elements are all required—from right living to right concentration. Having built up a properly ethical approach to all human relations, as in the classical Yoga, and developed the same sort of centred attention, in Buddhist practice one *deliberately avoids* being absorbed into the focus. This is where the image of Merton the watchman is so powerful. The aim is to observe the object, whether it lacks any specific 'content' or is familiar and meaningful. Often the immediate focus of attention has a much more dynamic quality than is found in the classical Yoga-practice, something which moves or changes as it is observed; for example a sound, a feeling, or the breathing. Whereas in the yogic method of 'breath-control' one seeks to become one with the focus, in Buddhist mindfulness one simply watches and notes what happens. As we shall see later, the practice involves a number of stages in which a whole series of attachments are carefully put to one side so that the meditator achieves an inner equanimity or openness. For the Buddhist, of course, that is sufficient; there is 'no thing' to wait for. In the virtue of equanimity that is inseparable from compassion for all suffering beings lie the seeds of that deep conviction that all things possess the Buddha-nature. Merton understood this well. For him, however, the practice of mindfulness built not virtues that were ends in themselves but a sort of platform where he waited upon the Word to call.

For all their outward similarities, Merton and Abhishiktananda engage with very different spiritual worlds and their Christian practice takes different forms. No doubt they both speak of sharper experiences of intimacy with the divine than might have been possible if they had stayed safely immured within the monastic cloister. But as contemporary mystics of the interreligious encounter, their significance lies less in isolating discrete patterns of interiority than in articulating the transformative experience of many people who find themselves touched by God's Spirit not despite but precisely *because* they engage with the 'religious other'. In other words, the witness of their inner lives and the intensity of their writing are taken as confirmation of the practice of the 'meditators', giving it a certain authenticity. They also provide a graphic illustration of the 'pastoral cycle' which aims to correlate the normative tradition with the experience of persons of faith. Merton and Abhishiktananda, Griffiths and Monchanin, William Johnston and Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, Vandana Mataji and Elaine MacInnes, join a distinguished lineage that includes early Jesuit missionaries such as Roberto de Nobili and Matteo Ricci with their carefully discerned commitment to inculturation in India

and China respectively, and the near legendary exploits of St Francis of Assisi who, in the wake of the carnage of the fifth crusade, led a mission of friendship and peace at the court of the Saracen Sultan al Kamil at Damietta in 1219. In their different ways they seek to respond to God's Word in a pluralist world and speak of it in new ways. How can their experience help build a theology of religions with a distinctively contemplative or mystical face? The next part of this chapter considers that question through the lens of a brief exercise in Comparative Theology.

THE DISCERNING WISDOM OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Theology of religions is concerned to give a systematic and pastorally informed account of the questions that the phenomenon of religious pluralism raises for Christian faith. The challenge is not to defend the Christian tradition against a problematic other but to bring the everyday experience of the sort of people with which I began this article into a dialogue with the normative tradition. In other words, a theology that takes the Church's experience of pluralism seriously needs to attend to the intellectual coherence of Christian faith *and also* to find ways of articulating and supporting the fourfold dialogue as a set of practices that has its own integrity. These two aspects together build up a Christian sense of self as intrinsically dialogical, as constituted by the encounter with the other. Such a theology may begin with, but will always seek to go deeper than, a Christianity-centred reformulation of the analogies and conceptual patterns that are discerned in another religious world. To faithful witness to the Word of God is joined an openness to possible 'seeds of the Word'. To the study of the sources of an ancient wisdom is joined informed conversation with other persons of faith. To a largely cognitive process of assimilation is joined a more affective attention to what turns observers into participants. Comparative Theology is one example of a 'style' of theologizing that begins by listening attentively for the mysterious echoes of the familiar in the unfamiliar—what George Herbert memorably called 'something understood'.

For Francis Clooney, the most influential of its advocates and a specialist in Hinduism, Comparative Theology is best described by invoking Anselm's revered formula, 'faith seeking understanding'; through the practice of reading religious texts in dialogue with each other, one learns the skills needed to engage fruitfully with other faith traditions (Clooney 2010: 57ff.). James Fredericks, a Buddhist scholar, adds the notion of friendship which grows as readers learn how to trust one another (Fredericks 1999: 173ff.). My own work begins with places, symbols, and artefacts as well as the wisdom inscribed in texts, seeking the echoes of what is familiar in a strange world (Barnes 2012: 6ff.). Comparative Theology seeks to bring the truths taught by Christian faith into explicit conversation with the concepts and symbols—and persons—which belong strictly within another religious tradition. As a practice of faith grounded in the engagement with the other, it takes its rise from the experience of many people touched by the dialogue

of religions that faith is deepened, and not diluted, by the encounter with another religious world; learning about another religious tradition goes hand in hand with learning about one's own. The most common version is a sort of interreligious *lectio divina*—though it is, of course, possible to bring artefacts and symbolic forms of all kinds into an imaginative correlation.

Typically, as a formal theological exercise, it involves limited yet focused 'case studies' in which canonical and key commentarial texts, dealing with similar themes, are brought together. On the one hand, comparative theologians are responsible to the normative tradition; on the other, they take on a second responsibility, before another religious world that is refracted through a 'classic', to use David Tracy's term: a text, artefact, symbol, event, that maintains the spirit of a culture and goes on generating meaning for the future (Tracy 1981). Beginning with a generous theological vision of a world where the Spirit is always at work, what is cultivated is an appreciation of the inner dynamics of another community of faith. Whether involving personal spiritual reading, a close reading of texts exhibiting common themes, or an activity of teaching in which the truth invested in texts is discussed, an interactive process is built up in which the life-giving words that cross religious and cultural divides are given space to speak. This gives a significant contemplative dimension to the enterprise.

In many ways there is nothing particularly novel about the practice. Persons of faith, as Paul Griffiths reminds us, have always lived out of commentarial traditions which have been built up over the centuries in response to questions that challenge the coherence of the tradition (Griffiths 1999: 40ff.). What is new is the contemporary interreligious context. As the wider experience of the 'meditators' has shown, 'other' religious texts are now familiar and easily accessible; the barriers have broken down. For them the reading of texts is about coming to terms with responses of deep puzzlement, aesthetic delight, and religious wonder. The wisdom inscribed in texts, or any classic form or artefact, is less a 'message' than the sedimentation of the life-long practices of learning which have formed the interpreting community—and make possible the hermeneutical pondering to which life-before-the-text gives rise. For Clooney, Comparative Theology begins not with speculative or philosophical questions but with the work of gaining an entrance into another world and an ever-discerning following of an *intuition*, ultimately about where the Spirit is at work (Clooney 2010: 106). Reading a text from another religious tradition alongside a more familiar text from one's own is not a straightforward process; Clooney's point, however, is that without a willingness to plunge into the process no one would ever come to terms with the real problems of interreligious reading, let alone appreciate the joys of discovery. This makes Comparative Theology more of a meditative exercise in following the Spirit than a systematic resolution of difference and dilemma. While its insights will always be subject to the scrutiny of the normative tradition, as an exercise in learning the touchstone of success will lie in the measure to which the truth of tradition is communicated back and forth across religious borders.

In a short space it is only possible to give a brief example of the sort of contemplative 'case study' that might help to take further the ideas about contemplative practice discussed above. Bringing Merton or Abhishiktananda into dialogue with similar

writers and commentators from Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu traditions is beyond the scope of a single chapter. Instead as a 'case study' I want to take up one of the constant preoccupations of Merton's last years, the dialogue between Christianity and Zen. In the preface to a collection of essays dealing mainly with 'Oriental religion,' published a year after the end of the Second Vatican Council, Merton explains that he is not concerned 'merely to look at these traditions coldly and objectively from the outside but, in some measure at least, to try to share in the values and the experience which they embody' (Merton 1967: p. ix). Some ten years earlier, the first reference to Zen in his journal records an intuition that arises from his own Christian faith. Zen, he says, 'in its fundamental psychological honesty' is 'inseparable from the interior poverty and sincerity Christ asks for' (Merton 1995: 139). Merton did not do Comparative Theology, but he would have warmed to its insistence on the intuitive following of the Spirit of Christ. Rather than talk about a journey that took him to the very heart of the Buddhist world in psychological terms, I prefer to think of it as a continuum, another stage in the cycle of a properly *holistic* mindfulness in which the sheer ordinariness of things gains a transformative power of its own. Merton's description of what he sensed at Polonnaruwa has become something of a 'classic' in its own right. To that extent it is much more than a 'mystical moment' in a single life but an event that is both dynamic and integrative.

Commentators, Buddhist and Christian, spend inordinate amounts of time debating the exact nature of *Nirvana* or the *satori* experience in Zen and the extent to which it can be integrated into a theistic framework. Their questions are certainly important, even if the answers never seem entirely satisfactory. That may be because Buddhism, even in its Zen form, is as much about preparation for enlightenment and reaction to it as about isolating some discrete inner 'consciousness'. Merton touches on this when he brings Emptiness and Compassion together as aspects of the *dharmakāya*, the mystery of what is. *Prajñā* and *Karunā*, to use the familiar Sanskrit terms, are correlatives, two sides of one quality of human perfection, a Wise Compassion or a Compassionate Wisdom. In the last book to be published before his death, Merton finishes a little dialogue with Suzuki by rejecting 'positivistic' accounts of Zen as verging on the totalitarian. Rather, he says, 'Zen implies a breakthrough, an explosive liberation from one-dimensional conformism, a recovery of unity which is not the suppression of opposites but a simplicity beyond opposites' (Merton 1968: 140). As with all forms of Buddhism, the quality of consciousness named but never explained in the texts as *Nirvāna* cannot be separated from the way that prepares for them. With that introductory remark, let us attempt a brief exercise in Comparative Theology.

Traces of the Other

What follows is a meditation on a reading of two texts: the *Cloud of Unknowing*, ascribed to an anonymous author, most likely a Carthusian monk, who lived and wrote in the English East Midlands in the mid-fourteenth century, and the *Mumonkan*, a collection of forty-eight koans with a brief comment and verse, composed in 1229 by the Chinese

Zen monk, *Wumen*, or *Mumon* in Japanese. Both act as guides to meditative practice, encapsulating a religious world and way of life, and continue to inspire further translations and commentaries—a number of which are noted in the bibliography appended to this chapter. The *Cloud* is inseparable from categories of worship and devotion, not to mention sacrament and sacrifice, which are intrinsic to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; the *Mumonkan* owes more to a philosophical critique of intellectual constructs of all kinds that inhibit the bare attention of mindfulness, the practice that Zen inherits from the great tradition of Indian Buddhism. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism has ever existed in an homogenized cultural vacuum. Rather, in both traditions a call to personal experience of truth goes hand in hand with a desire to preach truth to others—for the sake of ‘suffering sentient beings’, as the Buddhist would put it. To that extent both witness to a contemplative interiority I have earlier described as holistic. A style or manner of contemplative awareness that breaches any sort of narrowly conceived interiority is the most important resonance that echoes through the process of reading these two texts together.

Mumonkan is usually translated as ‘Gateless Gate’ but more literally means ‘barrier without a gate’. It can be likened to a border or frontier, with the implication that the traveller has to check in with the guard in order to pass from one side to another. It is one of a number of such collections and has generated a considerable subsidiary literature, the more popular end of which would be familiar to the ‘meditators’. The *Cloud* is a classic of the Christian contemplative life, bringing a stark yet simply stated version of the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius into a religious world that was dominated by an intense devotion to the person of the crucified Christ. The anonymous author treads a fine line between a biblically based account of salvation from sin through the incarnation and atoning death of Christ and the cosmic patterns of a mystical passage that seeks to participate in the life of the unknowable God. In another work, the *Book of Privy Counselling*, he explores this tension further and defends himself against his critics. It is no doubt the power of this constant dialogue between the kataphatic and apophatic ways that is the source of his contemporary popularity. Precisely because his version of the *via negativa* seeks always to keep the devotional orthodoxy of medieval Catholicism in touch with the ‘stirrings of love’ that constantly draw people into the cloud of unknowing, it finds a ready audience with those who seek a more personal integration of faith.

If justification is needed for this choice of texts, it lies not just with that inner theological dialogue that is as important today as it was in fourteenth-century England, but to the more pastoral sub-theme which runs through this chapter: guidance of those finding their way into the dialogue of religious experience. In terms of literary form both texts are based on a personal relationship of trust and intimacy. In both the teacher records practical advice and asks questions to test the progress of the pupil. In the *Cloud* the relationship is more monologue than dialogue, with the teacher constantly pressing his pupil to respond to the movements of God’s grace; the exemplary figures come from the Gospel, with the Martha-Mary story the guide for what is clearly regarded as the ‘best part’. The *Mumonkan* is more elliptical than rhetorical, with the contributions of ancient sages introduced in a seemingly anarchic fashion, as if to undermine any pretension the pupil may have gained to a complete understanding. In terms of ethical

preparation and the growth in virtue that is necessary for the contemplative life, both are in some measure of agreement; it would be surprising if they were not. The *Cloud* gives much more prominence to the Deadly Sins than anything comparable in the *Mumonkan* where the focus is always on the dispelling of intellectual concepts that distract from a single-minded focus on what is given in the present moment. Nevertheless, as the *Cloud* author makes clear in the very next chapter, it is not just sin that is to be avoided but carelessness in the smallest things. 'I want you to weigh every thought and stirring according to its own nature' (11).

Where they differ most obviously is in the relative weight given to what the *Cloud* author refers to as the 'work' of contemplation. Buddhism is much more of a 'mind-culture' than Christianity, and Zen, for all that it includes a strong ritualized structure, would not be Zen without its powerfully developed round of formal sitting or *zazen*. It needs no justification—and gets none. The *Cloud* author is not writing for a popular audience but neither does he exclude anyone who is serious about the contemplative life. He is anxious to defend contemplatives from the accusation of lazy irrelevance but he does not want to undermine the actives. He distinguishes active and contemplative life but allows that they are 'so linked together that, though they differ in some respects, neither of them may be attained without some part of the other' (8). Thus he encourages actives to rise above themselves, yet he is also clear that, if one is serious about the contemplative life, then any thought or mental image of God's gifts and works, however consoling and worthy in itself, has to be placed under the 'thick cloud of forgetting'. Only the blind 'stirring of love' can penetrate the 'cloud of unknowing' that surrounds those who aspire to a life with God alone.

Zen, as presented to us in the *Mumonkan*, does not spend much time on prior stages of preparation or the 'path of purification' which is such an important dimension of Theravada practice (Buddhaghosa 1976: 137–69; Smart 1992). The constant exhortation is not to get caught up in intellectual thoughts about the path but to focus directly on the single point that promises enlightenment. The word Zen can be traced to the Sanskrit root *dhyai*, to think of, imagine, or contemplate, giving us *dhyāna* and the Pali *jhāna* which refers to a single yet complex process of sifting the various levels of intellectual and affective attention which qualify the practice of mindfulness. What is described in the Theravada *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, 'on the fruits of being a wanderer', is a series of four *jhānas* which act as a bridge or passage in which the meditator moves from the 'one-pointed' concentration which is typical of all yogic methods to a more attentive and contemplative wisdom (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 1.47ff.). All this is taken for granted in Zen but still present in that image of the gate and the gatekeeper. The meditator has put aside any discursive or affective meditation and moved to a state described in the Pali texts as *upekkhā*, literally 'looking out over' and usually translated as equanimity. Now is the time, as *Mumon* insists: to 'cut off the mind road'. There is no need to attend to the details of meditation; to do so would be to risk getting caught up in examining ideas and concepts and ignoring the quality of pure attention.

The 'thick cloud of forgetting' would find a home here. The *Cloud* author describes a similar process of overcoming the sort of over-attention to what he refers to elsewhere as the 'names taken from material things' (*Mystical Theology*, 3) that are made to apply

analogously to God. For all that the words that make up 'positive theology' are to be used in praise and worship of God, care needs to be taken that they do not inhibit progress on the contemplative path. God is beyond all words; indeed God's 'incomprehensible transcendence is incomprehensibly above all affirmation and denial' (*Mystical Theology*, 5). Thus, having placed 'everything that was ever created' into a cloud of forgetting, the pupil is told to lift up his heart to God 'with a humble stirring of love'. As it is put at the beginning of the *Book of Privy Counsel*: 'see that nothing remains in your active consciousness but a naked purpose reaching out to God, not cloaked in any specific thought of God in himself, what he is in his own nature or in any of his works, but only that he is as he is' (1). Here the *Cloud* author adopts a similar tone to Mumon, but he becomes a good deal more expansive when he distinguishes between the faculty of knowledge and the faculty of love. God is always beyond the reach of the first, but by means of the second 'he can be fully grasped by each individual being, to such an extent that each single loving soul may, by virtue of love, embrace within itself him who is fully sufficient (and beyond comparison more than fully) to fill all the souls and angels that can ever exist' (*Cloud*, 4). Towards the end of the chapter he hammers the point further:

For those who hear reading or discussion about this work, and suppose that it can or should be achieved by labour of the intellect—and so they sit and search their intellects for ways to do it, and perhaps ingeniously torment their imaginations against the course of nature, and devise a kind of activity that is neither bodily nor spiritual—truly any such person, whoever he may be, is dangerously deceived. (4)

This is where the dominating image of the cloud of unknowing gains a formidable rhetorical power. The cloud surrounds and darkens the intellect and takes away all easy assumptions that spiritual progress can be made according to some foreordained plan. The way forward is through desires, not footsteps; the 'stirrings of the heart' spring forward swiftly to God 'like a spark from a coal' (4).

Much more than the formidably dense commentaries that attend Zen tradition, that little image of the spark affords a glimpse into the central practice of the koan. The word has overtones of a 'public case', a judgement offered by an enlightened teacher of the tradition. Aitken explains that 'koans are not riddles or puzzles whose trick is in their clever and obscure wording. They are the clearest expressions of perennial acts which students grasp with focused meditation and guidance' (Aitken 1990: p. xiii). One of the less obscure has a monk asking the great master, Joshu: 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' to which Joshu replies 'The oak-tree in the courtyard.' Bodhidharma was the legendary founder of Zen, the great patriarch who brought the Dharma from India towards the end of his long life. Yet he is reputed to have taught a way to enlightenment that was 'outside the scriptures'. So what does it mean to 'bring the Dharma'—and why should it matter? The truth about things demands an intimacy with that truth wherever it is found, a wordless intimacy, not an examination of what the words may or may not mean. Maybe the oak-tree is intended as a distraction

from a distraction, no more the source of intimacy than the record of Bodhidharma's travels. At any rate Mumon's summary verse is (for once) more than clear:

Words do not convey the fact;
 language is not an expedient.
 Attached to words your life is lost;
 blocked by phrases you are bewildered.

(Aitken 1990: 226–30)

Zen practice entails much more than a relentless looking within. It is more a matter of building up an attentiveness to the single point that is 'given' in the present moment, not scrutinized or constructed in some way by the controlling ego. The first, and by repute the most important, koan in the *Mumonkan* is known as Joshu's dog. We can imagine a scruffy mutt loping around the edges of the pristine zendo and—perhaps—disturbing the meditation of the monks. The distraction gives rise to a question put to Joshu: 'Has the dog Buddha-nature or not?' to which Joshu replies 'Mu.' Literally the word means 'No' and that might seem to be the end of the matter. But 'Mu' is not a straightforward apophatic way of denial designed to force the pupil into making a decision for the 'right' way. If the koan is a mind-bending conundrum intended to overcome the rationalizing mind, it works not by focusing relentlessly on the 'negative' emptiness of all concepts but by building up a more 'positive' yet tentative sensibility that glimpses another order of things in the midst of what is known-yet-unknown. Steven Heine's scholarly work on the textual tradition recognizes that, alongside what he calls the absolutist 'Emphatic Mu,' is another tradition of the 'Expansive Mu' which expresses a view of 'ambiguity and relativism' (Heine 2014: 14). Heine reminds us that the textual tradition is a lot richer and more complex than is sometimes imagined. At stake here is the place of the tradition itself and, more particularly, the role language plays in the way of enlightenment. Words carry thought and the process of thought is not overcome by reverting to some sort of empty silence. In the Zen tradition, and in the *Cloud* as well, language has to be pressed into the service of an experience of self-transcendence. To say that that experience cannot be expressed in words is not to deny that the use of poetry and rhetoric as well as logic and linguistic analysis has its part to play in pressing the limits of what can be said. At the end of a brief commentary, Mumon comes back to the koan and the role it plays in the disclosure of truth. 'How then should you work with it? Exhaust all your life-energy on this one word "Mu." If you do not falter then it's done! A single spark lights your Dharma candle.' A verse then follows:

Dog, Buddha-nature—
 the full presentation of the whole;
 with a bit of 'has' or 'has not'
 body is lost, life is lost.

(Aitken 1990: 9)

This is the way the koan ‘works.’ The use of any discourse is itself a transcending process—just as the *jhāna*-structure noted earlier moves toward a point of affective freedom and simplicity. The reader who is steeped in the language of Christian mysticism will be sensitive not just to particular resonant words and concepts but, more particularly, to the analogous patterns they play in the practice of contemplation. The word ‘spark,’ with its connotations of crackling points of life spinning off uncontrolledly from a centre of dynamic energy, does not, of course, describe some sort of ‘common ground’ that underlies the different contemplative practices. That would be against the spirit of both traditions which focus on life ‘on the way’ rather than any sort of speculation about the nature of transcendent reality. There are, however, resonances between the schemes of progress. ‘A single spark lights your Dharma candle’ is analogous to the light that the *Cloud*-author glimpses in the midst of the darkness of God’s overwhelming presence. The image points to the suddenness of the moment of insight that is so easily missed because expectations are always dominated by what is known. What is at stake here is precisely what cannot be known, but what does promise a certain enigmatic intimacy. For the *Cloud*-author the image of the spark comes in the middle of an excursus on the brevity of the work of contemplation: ‘it is neither longer nor shorter than an instant’ (4). What then begins as an exhortation about grasping the given moment changes abruptly to a more devotional passage about Jesus, Mary, and the saints who can teach the pupil about the mystery of ‘keeping time.’ Time here is not understood as extension but as a critical point of grace that escapes the critical intellect. It is here that the Zen image of the barrier adds an important dimension to this exercise in comparative reading. If the barrier is to be passed then the single word ‘Mu,’ for all that it seems to be a meaningless cry of negation, is what is presented to the gatekeeper, the teacher, who is looking not for any ‘answer’ but to judge—to make public—a certain inner quality of life that promises true transformation.

Transformation to what? Buddhism does not speculate, any more than absolutes of any kind are described. What is attended to, throughout such texts as the *Mumonkan*, is the practice of what is always known in all the Buddhist schools as the Middle Way, avoiding extremes, precisely so that the moment is caught when one grasps the insight, or perhaps more accurately one is grasped or lit up by the sudden spark of insight. ‘Suddenly Mu breaks open. The heavens are astonished, the earth is shaken. . . . At the very edge of birth-and-death, you find the Great Freedom’ (Aitken 1990: 9). As a practice of faith—Zen practitioners would be more likely to say Great Doubt—holding on to this single word is a way of attending to the disarming ‘no-thing’ of the moment—not its ‘whatness’ but more profoundly its ‘thatness,’ what in Sanskrit is called *tathatā*. This reminds us of the central act of wonder that runs through all the texts ascribed to the *Cloud* author: *God is as God is*. This mystery of a creation grounded in God’s active Word that continues to animate and recreate the world in the incarnation is spelled out in narrative terms that invite a profound dialogue with the more abstract language of Platonic philosophy. Buddhism’s own founding dialogue takes a very different turn—but nonetheless a dialogue it remains. The sort of tension noted in the *Cloud* author’s approach

to his own sources finds a parallel in Mumon's weaving together of early Buddhist cosmology and the inner spirit of Chinese and Japanese religious culture. If there is a common approach to the resolution of the tensions, it remains at the level of practice rather than metaphysics, with the significance of words as vehicles that carry meaning. Despite both authors' concern about the risk of allowing words to substitute for and take away from the mystery of what is, there is no alternative for human beings but to work with language in order to structure and support their 'stirrings' towards what lies strictly beyond words. Whereas in Zen a point of insight or enlightenment is often noted without being described in the commentaries that accompany the koans, in the contemplation commended by the *Cloud* author there is no such single moment because everything depends on God's own loving grace which lifts the 'stirrings' of the human heart but cannot be expressed in human language. That is not to deny, however, that God's grace reaches out to the contemplative soul, albeit in the darkness of the cloud of unknowing. To persevere in faith and hope, it is constantly repeated, one should 'hammer' on the Cloud, as it were, with a single word or *mantra*—to use the popular Sanskrit term, literally what 'shapes the mind'. Just as the enigmatic Mu carries rich semantic connotations in a tradition given to a constant paring down of the single point of concentration to a mysterious centre of intimacy, so words like 'God' and 'Lord' and 'Jesus' support the 'naked intent', a dynamic reaching out to God who is both our origin and our goal.

CONCLUSION—THE DIALOGICAL AND THE MYSTICAL

Let me finish by linking this 'case-study' with the themes I have sketched out earlier. I began with the four forms of interreligious dialogue, and suggested that the dialogue of religious or spiritual experience exercises some sort of mediating function linking life and action in a pluralist world with theological reflection.

If it is correct to speak of the 'mystical edges' of Comparative Theology, then there is more to the experience of 'meditators' than some genial fellow-feeling about a generalized Absolute. In the wake of Abhishiktananda's enlightened *jñāni* or Merton's wise watchman, they rise to the challenge of a spiritual life as 'border-crossers'. Pioneers or followers, they all have something to teach the wider Church not just about the dialogue of religious experience but about the experience of being-in-dialogue, about being called into question, invited into something new, and asked to learn more about the deepest of human desires, for God. I have used the word 'holistic' not to posit some unifying concept that negates difference but to describe the encounter with an otherness that is constantly returning to disturb the very tendency to think in univocal terms about 'mystical experience'. The Zen Buddhist path trodden by Merton and the entry into the Vedantic world espoused by Abhishiktananda operate with very different ontologies, neither of

which can be made to map on to a Christian theistic perspective in any straightforward way. Nor can they just be bolted together as versions of a generic 'Oriental mysticism'. Whatever the intellectual and spiritual struggles these two contemplatives went through, in the end—in, for instance, Merton's Polonnaruwa moment—any such 'resolution' turns out to be less important than something equally indescribable but more in tune with the familiar Christian contemplative wisdom which the *Cloud* author describes (using Walsh's translation) as a 'simple and direct reaching out to God for himself' (24).

The *Cloud* author finishes with a rare reference to the Christian mystical tradition, reminding us in Augustine's words that 'the whole life of a good Christian is nothing but holy desire' (75). Great mystical texts such as the *Mumonkan* and the *Cloud* are celebrated as records of a search which, building on history and liturgy and study as well as on the 'work' of contemplation, leads to a felt intimacy with whatever encapsulates those desires, whatever is taken to have supreme value. Comparative Theology is a practice of faith called forth by the exigencies of a pluralist age, but in an important sense it is no more than an extension of what Christians have always done—listening for the Word of God wherever it is spoken. Such a practice, especially when it takes place on strange borderlands, calls for qualities of imagination and generosity, virtues of fortitude and perseverance, and a capacity for sensitive discernment. 'The dialogical' becomes bound up with 'the mystical'; the very framework which allows resonances to be heard nourishes not just a faith that seeks understanding but a faith that makes a personal impact precisely because it comes from a response to an otherness that always returns, forever betraying traces of God's loving presence.

SUGGESTED READING

Barnes (2012); Clooney (2010); Fredericks (1999).

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CHAPTER 33

ESCHATOLOGY

HUGH FEISS

THIS chapter connects two realms of study that have a natural affinity, even if both realms are difficult to delineate. Mysticism is an intense experience of the presence (and absence) of God, recounted in texts and testimonies of those who have had such experiences. Mysticism is a relationship with God, both cognitive and affective, via the spiritual senses. Christians interpret these experiences as foretastes of heaven, of the final, consummate and complete mutual presence of the Christian and the triune God. Mystical experience, then, is a form of partially realized eschatology, of eternal life experienced inchoately in time as contemplation, union, divinization, or the birth of the Word in the soul (McGinn 1992: pp. xi–xx, 265–343).

Neither experience *of God* nor heaven have any place in a materialistic or physicalist worldview (Russell 2006: 13–14). There can be unusual psychic experiences susceptible of neuroscientific study, but no transcendent and personal God. On the other hand, contemporary science has alerted us to understandings of time and space that are quite different from those of our lived experience on this planet. If the mystics, and a fortiori, the blessed, seem to go beyond the limits of our ordinary experience of time and space, the ‘time’ and ‘space’ they experience are perhaps some of many that are possible to conscious beings in their experience, love, and awareness of the Absolute (Robinson 2015).

Eschatology concerns death and what comes after death. Mysticism is a foretaste specifically of heaven, not of hell, purgatory, or judgment, although these other eschatological events have sometimes been the objects of visionary experiences (Gardiner 1993; Zaleski 1987; Easting 2007).

Heaven has been imaged and imagined in various ways. If heaven is conceived not as an intimate sharing in the life of God, but as a kind of family reunion that replicates life on earth, the nexus between mysticism and eschatology becomes tenuous (McDonnell and Lang 1988: 181–227). Likewise, when heaven is no longer conceived of as eternal life in intimate union with God, but as a human achievement to be realized on earth, heaven and earth both become godless. The Kingdom of Heaven is replaced by a Marxist or technocratic or social-democratic infra-worldly paradise, which in fact is not attainable in this world and not located elsewhere, a utopia. This is not realized eschatology, but a

projection of the myth of progress or Pelagianism writ large. In Christianity, both mystical experience and heaven are gifts, grace, not the result of effort, technique, or social engineering. Belief in the gift of heaven that God has in store when he brings human beings into the divine embrace helps inoculate Christians against the lure of utopia. It should not, however, make them complacent: the anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth, suffused with justice and love, is a blueprint for work now. Even if the Kingdom of Heaven exists ahead and beyond, it also is present and coming in the world today (Rahner 1974: 21–4).

The task of the remainder of this chapter is to make five soundings in the history of Christian mysticism to see how mysticism and eschatology have intersected, and then relate those soundings to a phenomenology of prayer.

VITA OF ST BENEDICT: THE WORLD AND DEATH IN THE LIGHT OF GOD

The final chapters (33–8) of the *vita* of St Benedict (480–543/547), which constitutes book 2 of the *Dialogues* attributed to Gregory the Great (540–604), interweave mystical experience, visions, and eschatology (Kardong 2009: 123–47).

The series of episodes that ends the story of Benedict's life begins with the last of the annual visits that his sister Scholastica, a nun, paid to St Benedict (Gregory, *Life*, 32.4–36.2; Kardong 2009: 123–5). They customarily spent the day in prayer, but on this occasion she unsuccessfully entreated St Benedict to extend their colloquy through the night. He refused on the grounds it was not allowed to spend the night outside the monastery. Scholastica then prayed fervently with tears that soon were mirrored in a torrential rainstorm. Benedict had to stay the night. Gregory comments that God, who is love, favoured her wishes over Benedict's because she loved more. Three days later, Benedict saw Scholastica's soul fly to heaven in the form of a dove. He sang hymns of praise to God, and then ordered her to be buried in the tomb he had prepared for himself. Gregory observes, seemingly without irony, that thus it came about that those who had always been of one mind in the Lord were not separated in body by the tomb.

As Kardong observes, this story seems to presuppose that Scholastica had a premonition of her death and 'so was intent on sharing the happiness of the vision of God that both of them so ardently longed for' (Kardong 2009: 127). In the account of this meeting, there is no description of mystical experience, though the conversation between Benedict and Scholastica is reminiscent of the conversation and shared mystical experience that Augustine and Monica had at Ostia. Having learned this lesson about divine love, Benedict is now ready to experience God in a mystical way.

Servandus, a deacon and abbot, came to visit Benedict periodically, 'and by discussing the sweet food of the heavenly fatherland, they could at least taste it with longing, even if they could not enjoy it perfectly' (Gregory, *Life*, 35.3; Kardong 2009: 131). On this occasion, Benedict arose in the night to pray.

Standing at the window and praying to Almighty God in the middle of the night, he suddenly saw a light pour down that routed all the shadows of the night. It shone with such splendor that it surpassed daylight, even though it was shining in the darkness. A wonderful thing followed this contemplation, for as Benedict reported later, the whole world was brought before his eyes as if collected in a single ray of sunlight.

(Gregory, *Life*, 35.6–7; Kardong 2009: 131–2 altered)

Gregory explains the meaning of this experience to Peter, his interlocutor in the *Dialogues*:

To a person who sees the Creator, all creation looks narrow by comparison. No matter how little divine light she sees with, everything created seems small. For the capacity of the mind is expanded by the light of intimate contemplation. It is so enlarged by God that it becomes greater than the world. The soul of the seer even goes above itself. For while the contemplative soul is ravished in the light of God, it is dilated. . . . Swept up into God, it can easily see [with the ‘interior light of the mind’] whatever is beneath God.

(Gregory, *Life*, 35.6–7; Kardong 2009: 132–3; cf. Julian of Norwich, *Shewings*, 5; Crampton 1994; Feiss 2004)

In connection with this ravishing and dilation by the light of God, Benedict also saw the soul of Bishop Germanus of Capua carried by angels to heaven in a fireball. Gregory reports that Benedict shouted to Servandus to come, and he arrived in time to see a flicker of the light that had so dazzled Benedict (Gregory, *Life*, 35.3–4; Kardong 2009: 132).

As Kardong comments, there are several parallels between this story and Benedict’s meeting with Scholastica and his subsequent vision of her. Benedict is visited by a special friend; they have daytime discussions on the things of God; at night Benedict sees the assumption of a soul to heaven. However, in this second story, the primary object of Benedict’s vision is the Creator. In the light of contemplation, his mind is stretched to be greater than the world. The whole world appears to him, as it did to Scipio in a dream reported by Cicero, as very small. The force of the experience derives from the fact that the world, which is not puny or contemptible, but the vast handiwork of the Creator, appears small when viewed in the divine light (Kardong 2009: 133–7).

In the final chapter of his *vita* of Benedict, Gregory writes that Benedict foresaw and announced the day of his death. On that day he asked his disciples to carry him to the oratory. There he received the Body and Blood of the Lord, raised his hand to heaven, and breathed out his last as he prayed. That day two brothers saw a brilliantly lit street running from east side of the monastery straight up to heaven. They saw an old man standing on that shining road, who told them: ‘This is the path on which Benedict, beloved of the Lord, is going to heaven’ (Gregory, *Life*, 37.1–4; Kardong 2009: 139–140).

Benedict’s apotheosis, like his vision of the world in the light of its Creator, comes at the end of his life. Gregory spent thirty-two chapters telling of Benedict’s development from wise child to miracle worker, from precocious hermit to discerning abbot, from lawgiver to lover. As he comes to the end of his account, between the stories about

Benedict's vision of the Creator and his death, Gregory says that those who want to know about Benedict's manner of life should read his Rule, outstanding for discretion and clarity, for Benedict 'could not teach other than he lived' (Gregory, *Life*, 36.1; Kardong 2009: 139). In the categories of the early theorists of monastic living and prayer, Evagrius and Cassian, grace first leads the monk to growth in virtue and mastery of his thoughts and impulses, then the monk is ready to receive the grace of contemplation. After the description of Benedict's experience of the divine light of the Creator, there is nothing more for Gregory to say about Benedict's life on earth. The next step is his journey out of this world in light to Light dawning in the East.

THE TWELFTH-CENTURY VICTORINES: DESERTING GOD BY SHARING IN CHRIST'S COMPASSION

The canons regular of the Abbey of St Victor in Paris in the twelfth century are renowned for their theory and practice of biblical interpretation (Coolman 2010; Nakamura 2011; Zinn 2010–; Mousseau and Feiss 2018). The framework for their interpretation was the traditional understanding of the four senses of scripture: the literal, the doctrinal (allegorical), moral (tropological), and anagogic. The anagogic sense is twofold: it leads or points both to a foretaste of final union with God in love and contemplation and to the consummation of that union in eternal life in heaven. Most often in their sermons the Victorines pay little attention to the literal sense or, often, to the doctrinal meaning, and concentrate on the tropological sense. However, the endings of their sermons are almost always anagogic, because what they have said about living according to the moral sense leads to a prayer that Christ will lead them and their audiences to eternal life with God.

For example, at the end of a complex and hitherto unedited sermon on Advent, Godfrey of St Victor writes:

The contemplation I mean is not that which dreams the vain fictions of philosophy, but one which illumines the secrets of the true faith... but unites by contemplating the grace of God....

The book of Genesis... tells how one night Leah bought the embrace of her husband from her sister and joint-wife with a portion of mandrakes [Gen. 30: 14–16; Constable 1998: 1–141]. Leah, for the price of the mandrakes, that is, for the outlay of good reputation, for one night drew away men of virtues suitable for herself but more dedicated to the embraces of beautiful Rachel, that is, to the study of wisdom. That is, Leah drew them into the laborious and agitated activity of this life. She drew them away from those embraces and, when they were joined to her, caused them to engender many fruits of goods works. For the embrace of Rachel, that is, comprehension of true wisdom, is more rare in the night of this life, until this night

passes and the day fully arrives. May he who is the true day from day, who now comes in the flesh as our Redeemer and is going to come in majesty as our Judge to judge the living and the dead and the world by fire, deign to hasten there us who long for him. (Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, MS. Lat. 1002, 16v–17r)

The Victorines were fond of tracing the steps of the Christian's journey to God. They schematized these steps in various ways; e.g. contrition, conversion and contrition, reading, meditation, prayer, virtuous action, contemplation, and compassionate service; or purgation, illumination, and union; or four stages of passionate love. Such schemas were not meant rigidly and are best thought of as spirals, in which the steps are repeated, rather than linear progressions.

For example, in his sermon-treatise for the Feast of All Saints, Achard preaches on the nine responsories for the lessons of the Feast. He distinguishes three heavens (Achard of St Victor, Sermon 14; Feiss 2001: 255–90). Having thus acquired the virtues of action in the first heaven, in the second heaven the Christian ascends through the virtues of speculation, by which he passes from created things to their Creator, in whom he contemplates created things as they exist in their causes in the mind of God. Perceiving the goodness and love by which and for which God made things, the contemplative is enflamed with love of God.

Then the pure mind is made fruitful by the Holy Spirit so that the Son of God may truly and abundantly be conceived by it when it is aroused and invited to contemplate him in himself...by the impulse of the divine Spirit, since it is totally inflamed to see the face of God by the ineffable fire of divine love... It is totally rapt, dilated, and raised up by the force of love and the attraction of internal sweetness. It is in labor as often as it has thus conceived a spiritual desire as if placed in the light of contemplation; it strives wholeheartedly to burst forth into contemplation and, as it were, pass wholly into God. It give birth when it reaches what it strives for, when [the door] is opened to the one knowing, when it is hidden in the hidden recesses of the divine countenance, and, following Paul, it is caught up to the third heaven. (Achard, Sermon 14.22; Feiss 2001: 288)

In conjunction with the second heaven, where the contemplative is inflamed with the love of God, Achard comments 'anyone who is enkindled within with the force and fervor of divine love tries also to enkindle others with the same fire' (Achard, Sermon 14.20; Feiss 2001: 286). This idea that not only does virtuous activity lead to contemplation, but that contemplation leads to service, after the pattern of the self-emptying Son of God, is a distinctive feature of Victorine theology. For example, in a sermon for Quadragesima, Achard sketches out seven deserts which Christians traverse to reach union with God: the desert of desertion of God; the desert of life in the world, which they desert not out of fear of perishing if they don't embrace a cloistered life, but because they desire to please God; the desert of indulging the flesh; the desert of their own will; the desertion of the limits of reason required to accept the mysteries of faith; the desertion of neighbour in outer ways—the provision of food, protection, teaching, and

consolation—although they still pray for them and care about them in their hearts. Having passed through these six deserts, the Christian passes

to contemplation of the sublime divinity of Christ. There they too have a presentiment of 'the peace that surpasses all understanding' (Phil. 4: 7) and 'their place becomes peaceful' (Ps. 76: 30). They depart from their minds to God, their way of life is in heaven (Phil. 3: 20), and their 'life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3: 3). There they enjoy some of the delights and first fruits of paradise, entering into rest and the joy of their Lord (Heb. 4: 11; Matt. 25: 21), as far as is possible while still in frail flesh. To a great extent there they lay aside the form of a slave and, being free, assume the form of God (Phil. 2: 6–7). . . . Set in such a great light, they easily apprehend in what great darkness the world, which they have under their feet, lies. . . . They cannot be unmoved by compassion, because, after being brought into the cellar of wine by the spouse, they are inebriated with love so that they want everyone to be as they are. They remember the one who, being free of all, made himself the slave of all, not seeking what was his but what belonged to the many. There comes to their minds the spiritual divine example for the Only-begotten one, who 'although he was in the form of God,' equal to God the Father, 'thought it not robbery,' but nature 'to be equal to God,' and nevertheless emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and was found in human condition among humans and for humans. Willy-nilly, they too are drawn from heaven to earth by bonds that though strong are light, because they are full of love. They would willingly, because much more pleasingly, rest within, among the caresses of the spouse whose inner sweetness they have experienced, were it not that the love of Christ, their spouse, urges them on, and his example stirs them up to go out, following their spouse. To this is added the bond of brotherly love and the example for the companions of the spouse. And so they too go out, following the spouse wherever he goes. . . . Those who first deserted their neighbor for God, now also, in a way, desert God for their neighbour.

(Achard, Sermon 15.35; Feiss 2001 346–8)

In a similar vein, Richard of St Victor wrote in *On the Four Degrees of Violent Love* that

In the first degree the soul thirsts for God. In the second it thirsts toward God. In the third the soul thirsts into God. In the fourth it thirsts in accordance with God. . . . And so the third degree of love exists when the mind of a man is snatched away into that abyss of divine light, so that in this state, the human mind, forgetful of all external things, forgets even itself and passes entirely into its God. . . . Therefore, when the soul has in this manner been melted away in the divine fire, inwardly softened and thoroughly liquefied, . . . just as liquefied metal easily flows down into whatever passage is open to it, running toward the things that lie below, so the soul in this state voluntarily humbles itself to every act of obedience and bends itself freely to every humiliation according to the divine arrangement. And so in this state the form of the humility of Christ is impressed.

(Richard of St Victor, *Four Degrees of Violent Love*, pars. 26–8, 38–43; Kraebel 2011: 286–7, 291–3)

Thus, for these Victorines, in the highest contemplative union with God the soul is stamped with the image of Christ, who out of compassion for sinners humbled himself even to death on a cross. The effect of such a view is to modify or deepen the idea of mystical experience by giving it a Christological shape. Mystical experience is a foretaste of heaven, but more than that it is a surrender to the love of God, which moved the Son to take up residence away from God for the sake of his brothers and sisters, whose humanity he assumed. In this view, the connection of mystical experience and heaven lies not primarily in vision but in divine love. The foretaste leads to compassion. What will love be like when every tear has been wiped away? What form will love of neighbour take when neighbours share the bliss of heaven? Perhaps the answer is the jubilation that Richard of St Victor mentions—a shared ecstatic song.

Adam of St Victor (d. 1148), a musician and poet, often sounded this theme: the harmony of voices singing to God in choir is an anticipation of heaven. Whether or not such singing was a mystical experience, and surely it was sometimes, the concordant voices praising the creator anticipated blessedness of heaven:

When our choirs
sound in harmony,
let there be union
in the melody of our actions.

...

From different people discordant sound comes forth
unless the Finger of God
tunes the chords
with its sweet teaching.

...

Let the unity of the faithful
Taste this sweetness
until it possesses
its fullness.

(Adam of St Victor, 'Ex radice caritatis', ll. 25–8, 31–5;
45–8; Grosfillier 2008: 358–9; my tr.)

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: FORETASTE, REST, AND CONSUMMATION

The Victorines believed that when the mystic was configured to Christ, he was drawn back by compassion. St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the great Cistercian writer, mystic, and influential churchman, taught that, even in heaven, before the general resurrection the joy of the blessed was incomplete, because the soul cannot be fully at rest in God while it still yearns to be reunited with its body.

Bernard presented the Christian life as proceeding in three stages, or better, having three dimensions: confession, devotion, and contemplation. In discussing contemplation, Bernard frequently refers to his own experience of God, and to the experience of his listeners and readers, made possible by the 'spiritual senses'. A person experiences the presence of God to the extent that she loves God (McGinn 1994: 181–94).

'God himself is the reason for why he is to be loved. As for how he is to be loved, there is to be no limit to that love' (Bernard, *On Loving God*, prol.; Walton 1995: 3). With this phrase, Bernard opens his treatise *On Loving God*, a letter-treatise that early in his career (1124–5) he addressed to Cardinal Haimeric, the papal chancellor (Bernard de Clairvaux 1992: 33; Stiegman in Walton 1995: 59–66). Bernard distinguishes four degrees in the expression of the basic human passion of love. In the first degree one loves oneself for one's own sake. This is a deep impulse of human nature; it is kept in bounds by the command to love one's neighbour as oneself. The second degree is to love God for one's own benefit, because one experiences God's help. In the third, one loves God for God's sake, quite apart from the benefit that brings oneself. In the fourth degree a person loves himself for the sake of God, and for no other reason. In this experience, which is rare and fleeting, a person is rapt, loses himself, ceases to experience himself in an experience of God, as all human feelings melt into the will of God (Bernard, *On Loving God* 8.23–10.27; Walton 1995: 25–30).

This raises a question for Bernard. What about the souls of the blessed before the final resurrection? The desire and hope to receive back their bodies keep them from turning completely from themselves. 'The soul does not want to be perfected without that from whose good services it feels it has benefitted in every way.' The groom in the Song of Songs invites us to eat, drink, and be inebriated. 'Eat' refers to those working in the body; 'drink' to those who have set aside their bodies in death; 'be inebriated' to those who have resumed their bodies (Bernard, *On Loving God* 11.30–3; Walton 1995: 31–5; Kroemer 2016).

In his sermons for the Feast of All Saints, which he collected and arranged near the end of his life (Verbaal in Edmonds 2016: pp. xxvii–xxx), Bernard reiterates his ideas about the state of the soul after death and before the resurrection. Bernard begins Sermon 2 for the Feast of All Saints with a prayer that by the Holy Spirit's aid, 'I follow not the conjectures of my own opinion but the authority of divine writings, and that I seem not to be prophesying out of my head, but rather as far as possible relying on the witness of Scripture' (Bernard, All Saints 2.1; Edmonds 2016: 146).

Bernard then develops the metaphor of the Christian as a soldier. He serves valiantly, rejoicing in the first fruits of the Spirit, who comforts him in his weakness. The saints have finished their military service. Now they have joy in their spirit until the day comes when they will also have joy in their bodies. The light of the Lord's countenance is upon them, but after the general resurrection the Lord will fill them with the joy of his face. Currently, they rejoice in the remembrance of their earthly virtue, in the rest they now enjoy, and the certain expectation of future consummation (Bernard, All Saints 2.3–8; Edmonds 2016: 148–53).

As he promised at the end of All Saints 2, Bernard returns to the state of the saints before the resurrection in All Saints 3. The saints will not enter the courts of the Lord without us nor without their bodies. Bernard develops this with the idea of spot and wrinkle. The saints' affection flows toward God, but also back to Christians on earth and so it is wrinkled. They pray to God that soon all will be complete and their affection will be stretched tightly toward God (Bernard, All Saints 3.1–4; Edmonds 2016: 349–53).

In All Saints 4, Bernard traces the itinerary of the holy dead. First, they went to a place that was dark but restful, 'the Bosom of Abraham'. The Lord descended to this place, broke its bars, and led forth the just and put them under the altar in heaven. That altar is the very body of Christ. Bernard, 'by vision and contemplation, not by authority', knows that after the resurrection they will finally be raised up by Christ who in his divinity will show them the Father and the Holy Spirit. Then, as now, but in an incomparably greater way, the blessed will know God in creatures, in themselves, and in Trinity. Then their bodies will be light, agile, incorruptible, and impassible—conformed to the glorious body of Christ (Bernard, All Saints 4.1–6; Edmonds 2016: 159–66).

In the last of his sermons for the feast, All Saints 5, Bernard refers only in passing to the fact that the saints will not attain the fullness of beatitude until all the predestined are in heaven. Instead, he contrasts the saints' glory with the tribulations of those on earth. The saints are rapt in glory. They are in heaven in reality; those still on earth are in heaven through desire and memory. In those on earth, the flesh and spirit are at war, whereas God is 'complete and holy delight and rest for the spirits of the blessed' (Bernard, All Saints 5.8; Edmonds 2016: 173–4). The implication seems to be that the difference in the peace and happiness of the saints in heaven before and after the resurrection of the dead is much less than that between the saints of heaven and those still on earth.

On All Saints day 1331, Pope John XXII preached a sermon in which he reiterated St Bernard's sequence of 'bosom of Abraham', 'under the altar', and 'above the altar', and stated, 'You will enter the glory of God when you are with your body.' The theological faculty of Paris condemned Pope John's endorsement of Bernard's ideas. Their condemnation was reiterated by John XXII's successor, Benedict XII in his constitution of 1336, *Benedictus Deus*. According to this decree, all the souls of the just, including the souls of those in need of purification after they have undergone that purification, 'before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment, have been, are, and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of the holy angels'. More pointedly, Benedict XII decrees that 'these souls have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision', clearly and plainly, face-to-face (Hünemann 2012: 1136; Kroemer 2016: 181–3; Tugwell 1990: 131–74).

Bernard's theorizing about the state of the souls of the just before the resurrection of their bodies is indicative of his respect for the human body as an integral constituent of a human being. St Thomas Aquinas felt a similar uneasiness about the state of the souls of the just in heaven. He wondered, would the resurrection of their bodies add anything to the joy of the blessed? (Tugwell 1990: 149–54; Hundersmarck, 2000: 172–4).

Bernard invites us to imagine the body as the soul's loyal friend, companion, helper, and servant. Without it the soul cannot be at rest. However, it is not clear why not having a body would bar the soul from enjoying the vision and embrace of God. Admittedly, the soul would be self-aware because conscious of the absence of its body, but perhaps total self-forgetfulness in mystic rapture is not a requirement for heavenly enjoyment of the vision and embrace of God. Equally interesting is Bernard's opinion that the souls of the blessed would not want to enter the full presence and enjoyment of God until the full number of the just was filled up. There is a tension between the assumption that solitary contemplation and mystical rapture are models of heavenly existence, and the idea that the communion of saints is so strong that those who have died are waiting for their brothers and sisters to join them before they enter into the full joy of their Lord.

JULIAN OF NORWICH: YOU WILL SEE THAT ALL IS WELL, FOR LOVE IS HIS MEANING

Julian of Norwich died as an *inclusa* or enclosed anchorite sometime after 1416. When she was 30 and a half years old, on 8 May 1373, she received a vision of the crucified Christ. She described this vision in a short version of her *Showings* or *Revelations*, probably written not very long after she received it, and then pondered it for several decades before describing it at much greater length in a revised version (Julian of Norwich, *Showings*; Crampton 1994).

Scholars of Julian's works argue whether she is a mystic or a visionary (Magill 2006; Turner 2011: 27–31). By including her here, I am assuming that if not her visions or her theological acumen, then her evident love of Christ and her life of prayer and meditation in an anchorhold qualify her as someone who lived very deeply and persistently in the presence of God and so was a mystic in the loose sense the term is used in this chapter. She does not trace out the stages in the journey towards union with God, but she seems to have enjoyed such union.

Julian was a theologian. She thought deeply about her Christian faith. She revisited her vision, finding in it new layers of meaning, just like a medieval monastic searching for the spiritual meanings concealed within the letter of the text (Turner 2011: 27–31). Hildegard did something similar in her visionary works (Zátonyi 2013). Like a scholastic theologian, Julian sought to resolve apparent contradictions between what was revealed to her in her vision and her own experience and the Church's faith that she shared with her 'evenchristens'. Her theology was not separate from what today is called spirituality. In spite of and even as a result of her enclosure, she had something to share with others, and so she wrote a book (Turner 2011: 3–17, 27–31). Although her book was seldom read until the twentieth century, she is now widely known (Upjohn 1997; Salih 2008).

The heart of Julian's *Revelations* is a dilemma regarding eschatology. In her vision she does not see sin or hell. Christ tells her all will be well, but in her experience sin is certainly rampant in the world. The faith of the Church that she embraces (Turner 2011: 68–82) teaches that there is a hell and that there are sinners in hell. To variations of this dilemma she returns again and again. In chapter 11 it is divine providence that seems to rule out the possibility of sin:

And I saw truly that nothing is done by chance or accident but everything by God's prescient wisdom. If it seems to be chance or accident in our eyes, our blindness and lack of foresight is the cause... Therefore I had to grant that everything that is done is well done, because our Lord God does everything... For a man regards some deeds as well done and some deeds as evil, but our Lord does not regard them so.

(Julian, *Revelations*, 11; Wendeatt 2015: 55–6)

Since God in provident wisdom foresees, arranges, and creates all that is, there can be no chance and no-thing that is evil. Evil is nought, though terrible at the same time.

Christ asks Julian, 'Art thou wele payd [pleased] that I suffrid for you?' She answers that she is. He says, 'If thou art payde, I am payde; it is a joy, a blis, an endles lekying to me that ever suffrid I passion for the, and if I myht suffre more, I wold suffre more.' Julian comments, 'We be His blis, ... His corone, ... so grete blis to Jesus that He settith at nowte al His travel [travail], and His herd passion, and His cruel and shamful deth ...' The love that inspired Christ to suffer on earth is immeasurably greater than what he suffered. For his love was without beginning, is, and shall be without end. His bliss was full, because what he did could not have been better done (Julian, *Shewings*, 22; Crampton 1994: 66–8).

Christ showed her that her deepest longing, her Godly willing, was for him (Julian, *Shewings*, 26; Crampton 1994: 71). Nothing kept her or anyone from him but sin. Foolishly she wondered why God allowed the beginning of sin. She worried about this without reason or discretion. Jesus told her all that he said she needed to know: 'Synne is behovabil [fitting, expedient], but al shal be wel, and al shal be wel, and al manner of thyng shal be wele' (Julian, *Shewings*, 27; Crampton 1994: 72).

Adam's sin is the greatest harm that was ever done (Julian, *Shewings*, 29; Crampton 1994: 74). Then, Julian asked, how can all be well? She prayed to know the answer. She was given to understand two things. One is that the Lord is our salvation and our portion—this we know. 'That other is hid and sperid [closed] from us, that is to sey, all that is besiden our salvation. For it is our Lords privy counsell, and it longyth to the ryal lordship of God to have his privy counsell in pece, and it longyth to His servant for obedience and reverens not to wel wetyn [to know too well] His conselye' (Julian, *Shewings*, 30; Crampton 1994: 74–5). As the Trinity made all things of 'nowte', so the Trinity will make well all that is not well. God's word will be fulfilled. One part of our faith in God's word is that many creatures shall be damned. Julian thought that therefore it was impossible that all would be well. The only answer she received was this: 'What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall keep my word in all things, and I shall

make all things well' (Julian, *Revelations*, 32; Wendeatt 2015: 81). Julian realized then that 'the more we busy ourselves to know his secrets in this or anything else, the further we shall be from knowing' (Julian, *Revelations*, 33; Wendeatt 2015: 82).

God's chosen sin. This caused her fear. God answered her: 'I am keeping you very safe' (Julian, *Revelations*, 37; Wendeatt 2015: 87). In every soul that shall be saved is a Godly willing that never assents to sin, it seeks only what is good. Even our sins will be tokens of glory in heaven (Julian, *Shewings*, 38; Crampton 1994: 84). God loves us in our sins, as we should love our neighbours in theirs (Julian, *Shewings*, 40; Crampton 1994: 86–7).

In the rest of her book, Julian continues to understand just a little bit better how all will be well. She cannot get very far, but her theological probing, her restless faith in search of sight, is not in vain. When she reaches the end, she says that her book was begun by God's gift and grace, but it is not complete. Yet after fifteen years and more of striving to know what the Lord meant by her vision, she has been told:

'Do you want to know your Lord's meaning in this? Be well aware: love was his meaning. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. Hold fast to this, and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand nor know anything else from this for all eternity.' So I was taught that love was our Lord's meaning.... And all this shall be seen in God without end, which may Jesus grant us. Amen.

(Julian, *Revelations*, 86; Wendeatt 2015: 164–5)

Thus, for Julian faith, mysticism, theology, and eschatology converge: Love was and is and will be the Lord's meaning, a love manifest on the cross, wherein evil's victory was its defeat.

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN: MYSTICISM OF MATTER AND CONVERGENCE

If materialism and physicalism challenge the very existence of God, matter itself is not antithetical to the presence of God. The God who is no-where and no-when is present in every place and time. Hence, the Victorines sometimes distinguished between speculation and contemplation: the first occurs when God is encountered through, with, and in created realities, the second when God is known apart from created things. Speculation sees God in something that mirrors God to the beholder (Achard, Sermon 14.18; Feiss 2001: 284).

Richard of St Victor defined contemplation as 'the free insightful gaze of the mind, suspended in wonder, into the manifestations of Wisdom' (Richard of St Victor, *On Contemplation*, 1.4; Grosfillier 2013: 96; my tr.). The object of contemplation can be a material thing, an idea, the self, or God, One and Three. Contemplation of any of these can, through an excess of joy, wonder, or devotion, lead to ecstasy and

self-forgetfulness. Hence, material things can be the occasion and even the object of mystical experience, when they are seen as manifestations of divine Wisdom, expressions of the Word of God.

This Victorine teaching is not unique. Christian theology believes that the world was created through the Word, the perfect image of the Father. The Word became flesh, entered into a body liable to death. When he was crucified, Christ arose bodily and returned to the Father. Christ continues to act in the world sacramentally, by physical words, gestures, and things that become effective signs of transformation.

There is, then, a place for a mysticism of matter in Christianity, though perhaps it has not been emphasized (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 43; Rideau 1967: 229–30). Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), a renowned Jesuit palaeontologist, mystic, and theological writer invited twentieth-century people to a mysticism of matter. His ideas received a mixed reception, but there is little doubt that they struck a responsive chord in many people (Fabel and St. John 2003; Delio 2011). There are a number of reasons for this. Renewed emphasis on Christ's resurrection has led to a renewed interest in the doctrine of the resurrection of the bodies of all human beings and the New Heaven and New Earth they will occupy. The wonders revealed by science invite contemplation. Many are aware that they and all human beings are inescapably a part of a web of biological life and of a material universe that supports that life. They cannot thrive if the natural world does not thrive. As Teilhard believed, though for somewhat different reasons, the future of the earth is in human hands. As others do, he struggled to find an *issue*, a way out and a vision of a way forward that would inspire people to act on behalf of the future in the face of entropy and death (Mooney 1966: 15–22).

Teilhard's writings circle around a few key points. He often tried to sum up what he believed. For the purposes of this chapter, his 1950 essay 'The Heart of the Matter', will serve as a distillation of his ideas. He explains at the outset that the thoughts in it are an attempt to communicate a direct, personal, and mystical experience.

The Diaphany of the Divine at the heart of a glowing Universe as I have experienced it through contact with the Earth—the Divine radiating from the depths of a blazing matter: this it is that I shall try to disclose and communicate in what follows.

(Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 16)

In the first of the three sections of this biographical essay, Teilhard de Chardin writes that from his earliest childhood he had a 'sense of plenitude', which inclined him to seek 'a unique, all-sufficing, and necessary reality'. As a young child he found this reality concentrated in a piece of iron, and later in quartz, then in all stone. He then became fascinated with physics. He reports that when he discovered evolution, 'there gradually grew in me, as a presence much more than as an abstract notion, the consciousness of a deep-running, ontological, total Current which embraced the whole Universe in which I moved'. Teilhard perceived that matter and spirit were not two things, but two aspects of one and the same cosmic stuff, and that primacy belonged to spirit, that is, to

the future. He no longer sought consistency in simplicity but in organic complexity (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 16–29).

In the second section of 'The Heart of Matter' (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 29–39), he presents his growing insight into 'the human'. It took him twenty years to see how the human body could be consistent when it was so prone to dissolution, and how human individuality did not rule out a human totality. There were three stages by which he overcame these two obstacles. The first was his recognition of the 'noosphere', a thin but very active living membrane around the earth. There is a disposition in the cosmos toward self-arrangement, which brings matter to the point of reflection; then as a result, there is a demand for complete and final incorruptibility in the noosphere. Humankind has the possibility of higher unification. Hominization is still going on. Up ahead, there is a pole that imparts irreversibility.

The 'piece of iron' of my first days has long been forgotten. In its place it is the Consistence of the Universe, in the form of Omega Point, that I now hold, concentrated (whether above me or, rather in the depths of my being, I cannot say) into one single indestructible center, WHICH I CAN LOVE. (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 39)

In the third and final section of the essay (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 39–61), Teilhard explains that as a child he needed to relate to Christ as solid. The devotion to the heart of Jesus provided him with a reference point that was both spiritual and tangible. This was the first step towards a synthesis of the Above and the Ahead. The heart of Jesus took on the consistency and properties of energy and fire that could amorize (turn into love) the cosmic milieu. Thus, as the universe was becoming personal for Teilhard, so for him Christ was becoming universal. His ideas on this convergence were still somewhat vague when he wrote *The Divine Milieu* (1926/27), but gradually, Teilhard's vision sharpened:

By the mere appearance at the peak of Evolution of the Personal, the Universe was potentially becoming for me something that loved and could be loved. Even so, it called for nothing short of the coincidence of Christ with Omega Point for my eyes to be opened, in an explosion of dazzling flashes, to the astonishing phenomenon of a general global conflagration—the effect of *total amorization*.

(Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 50)

I managed to climb up to the point where the Universe became apparent to me as a great rising surge, in which all the work that goes into serious enquiry, all the will to create, all the acceptance of suffering, converge ahead into a single dazzling spear-head—now, at the end of my life, I can stand on the peak I have scaled and continue to look ever more closely into the future, and there, with ever more assurance, see the ascent of God. (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 52)

Teilhard came to see that as a result of the process by which God is revealed to us and incorporates us, God in some way transforms himself. For our part we have to disclose

him and in some sense complete him. As this process of cosmic union proceeds, the brilliance of God's presence grows, inviting us to recognize and express in words the great news. Now, he writes, I could see:

from the depths of the cosmic future as well as from the heights of Heaven, it was still God, it was always the same God, who was calling me. It was a God of the Ahead who had suddenly appeared athwart the traditional God of Above, so that henceforth we can no longer worship fully unless we superimpose those two images so that they form one. (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 53)

Teilhard calls this 'the mysticism of today': only a God incarnate in history can satisfy 'the irrepressible aspirations of our own mind'. Teilhard ends with a prayer to the Ever-Greater Christ:

I shall have the joy, when death comes, of closing my eyes amidst the splendor of a universal transparency aglow with fire.... You by right of your resurrection have assumed the dominating position of all-inclusive Center in which everything is gathered together. (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 55)

It is clear from 'The Heart of the Matter' how Teilhard's mystical experience of matter expanded into an eschatology, in which humanity, still at an early stage, is growing in consciousness and love. Humanity is being drawn forward to Christ, to be with him the *pleroma* or fullness that God intends it to be. He believed passionately that human beings need to see this in order to have hope and motivation to grow into the differentiating, complex, and stable communion for which they have been created. He was not unaware of the reality of sin and the danger of totalitarianism. Yet he believed and hoped to the point of certainty that humankind will choose to converge in a communion of love around Christ.

His theories raise many questions (Rideau 1967: 174–88). Certainly, Christians believe that ultimately all will be united in the one body of the risen Christ, and God will be all in all. In what way, though, does biological evolution continue in the evolution of human consciousness? Is humanity more convergent and loving now than in the past? Teilhard did not think that this final consummation would be directly the result of humanity's spiritual evolution, but he did think that human advance in history prepared the way for the time when God would gather up all of creation into eternal fullness and joy. He wrote to Maurice Blondel that he thought 'of an age in which men, having at last become conscious of their unity with all beings, and of their intimate links with everything else, will hold the plenitude of their souls available to cast, of their own free choice, into the divine center. All our work, ultimately, amounts to producing the sacrifice upon which the fire of God is to descend' (Rideau 1967: 183).

Over his long life, Teilhard's thought underwent many changes. His attention went from a mysticism of matter, to the spiritualization of evolution; his focus turned from the past to the future. In the process, his emphasis moved from the God present in the

materiality of the here and now to the God to come to evolved and spiritualized humanity. In his thinking, there does not seem to be much room for the resurrection of the body, although Teilhard did write in 1917 that 'Attractive and easy though it is to envisage a total spiritualization of the cosmos, it remains true that the risen flesh and the new earth (the body of Christ, in fact) will form one physically integrated whole' (Rideau 1967: 571 n. 18). Teilhard has little to say about the renewal of heaven and earth at the end of time; his focus was on the liberation of human spirits rather than on the transfiguration of the material world. He envisaged two possibilities for the last judgment: either unanimity in love or a splitting of humankind wherein some choose damnation.

Whatever one might think of Teilhard's eschatology, it evolved from an experience of God in the material world. In his 'The Mass on the World', penned on the steppes of Asia in 1923, he prays to God about this experience:

I have received from you an overwhelming sympathy for all that stirs within the dark mass of matter; because I know myself to be irremediably less a child of heaven than a son of earth; therefore I will this morning climb up in spirit to the high places bearing with me the hopes and miseries of my mother; and there—empowered by that priesthood which you alone (as I firmly believe) have bestowed on me—upon all that in the world of human flesh is now about to be born or to die beneath the rising sun I will call down fire. (Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 131)

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONCLUSION

The intersection of mysticism and eschatology in the writings discussed in this chapter can be situated in the phenomenology of prayer elaborated by Jean-Yves Lacoste (Lacoste 2004; Prevot 2015). Every human being is a body. Bernard's assertion of the incomplete fulfilment of the blessed before the final resurrections respects this: 'a soul separated from a body . . . is not what we know by the name of man' (Lacoste 2004: 7, 24). By virtue of his body each human being is in a place. The horizon of his place, of all places, is the world, which indicates the there that is beyond every here. Whether this horizon is 'a-theistic' as Heidegger and Lacoste maintain, or an opening up to the infinite, as neo-Thomists believe, it is the condition for the exercise of consciousness.

Although human beings inhere in the world, they are not primordially at home there, though at least at times the world can also become for them mother earth, a place where they build a home and encounter the sacred. Either as a stranger in the world, or at home on the earth, one is always existing towards death. In neither world nor earth is the Absolute within the horizon (Lacoste 2004: 7–22).

Lacoste uses the account of St Benedict's vision to illustrate the way in which liturgy and prayer subvert the limitations of place. Benedict was still bodily in the world, but in his vision—as in Julian of Norwich's vision of the hazelnut that echoes it (Julian,

Shewings, 5; Crampton 1994: 43–4)—the world appears in its totality against a new horizon. Benedict is ‘in a place without his being-in-the world providing the coordinates of this place, which is thinkable evidently only on account of a grace that suspends the authority the world exercises over our being’ (Lacoste 2004: 24–5). In this contemplative interval, the world and history are at a distance; transcending being-in-the-world, Benedict is being-toward the Absolute, being-before-God. What is true in an intense way in Benedict’s vision is true of prayer or liturgy generally. ‘Praise of God is the inchoation of eschatological practice’ (Lacoste 2004: 43). In prayer, the world ceases to envelope us; ‘we contest that being-in-the-world accounts entirely for our being; and we are proposing that a relation to the Absolute can have the first and last word on the question of who we are’ (Lacoste 2004: 44).

Prayer is ‘the expectation or desire for Parousia in the certitude of the non-parousiacal presence of God’ (Lacoste 2004: 45). Only in certain forms of mystical experience is there eschatological proximity; but that proximity is always approximate, incomplete. We know God, and sometimes we experience God’s presence, but that knowing and that experience are bound up with even greater unknowing and non-experience (Lacoste 2004: 48–9).

While they occur, prayer and liturgy symbolize and realize a peace and fraternity that are eschatological. This should inspire the pray-ers not to resign themselves to violence and justice within history. So it happened that contemplation of the Trinity and configuration to Christ led the Victorines to compassionate action in history. His encounter with God inspired Teilhard to elaborate a vision that was designed to inspire engagement in the world. Prayer, and a fortiori mystical presence to God, bring the eschatological future to bear on injustice and death. Prayer knows

that the world does not have in its possession the conditions by which it can or ever could bring about the eschaton. It also knows, one would at least hope, the fragility of the gestures it makes with its own order and the suspicion in which it can be held. It knows, finally, that the world from which it diverts itself is not handed over to the rule of violence with no possible recourse.... The world from which liturgy diverts us is not a world over which good will reigns, and, at bottom, it is this world from which we must take leave, in a meantime so as to discover our responsibilities in the world. (Lacoste 2004: 73)

Liturgy adds to the dialectics of alienation in the world and dwelling on the earth a third possibility, that of the Kingdom, which is already and not yet. Perhaps it was that possibility which took Bernard from his cloister to engagement in the conflicts and crises of his time. It was certainly his idea of the Kingdom that spurred Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to issue his impassioned plea to prepare the way for the coming Christ.

The reconciled existence that Christ effected takes place ‘in an interim between the eschatological blessings already granted and the eschatological blessings that still remain within an economy of the promise’ (Lacoste 2004: 139). Julian tried tenaciously, but with only partial success, to understand how the coexistence of evil and sin with the blessings already granted could be reconciled with the promise that all will be, was, and

is well. She knew that the love revealed in the cross is the answer, but she couldn't understand how. God and God's providence 'elude our thought' (Lacoste 2004: 141). In prayer and liturgy man is available to God, but God is not available to man.

Human beings live in the provisional. In prayer they exist in the penultimate, as close as one can come to the eschatological in this life. In this continuum, the mystic stands on the cusp of the penultimate and the eschaton, yet more aware than ever that he has not reached the infinite (Lacoste 2004: 137–63). He waits, approximating the poverty of the newborn and the dying. The mystic in his rapture loses even the awareness of his conscious self (Lacoste 2004: 172–82); he is aware only of the one thing necessary, which transcends any idea he can form or express. As the Victorines found, and Lacoste concludes, 'man says who he is most precisely when he accepts an existence in the image of God who has taken humiliation upon himself—when he accepts a kenotic existence' (Lacoste 2004: 194).

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